

# **SANGOMA BOY**

**BY**

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64,435 words

*For the greatest Khulu – Nelson Mandela.*

*And for my children, Elliot, Charlotte and Iris, who make me laugh and wonder every day.*

*And also for my best friends when I was a child, Sally Franz and Emma Archer van Garderen, in treasured memory of many glorious Bundu Bashing adventures.*

## OLLY: THE VISION

Olly's cap flies back and forth a couple of yards above his head, a scarlet saucer against the blue sky of a proper summer's day. The sun shines warm on his skin but inside he's shivering.

'Come on, Barking!' yells Asif. Barking is what the mean kids call him, and Asif is the meanest boy in the whole school. Murray sniggers. Murray is Asif's henchman and does everything he says.

'Wassamatter, Barking? Can't you use your hands?'

'Reach up and get it, Olly!' call the watching children from the patch of lawn. 'It's not brain surgery! Jump!'

When the bell rang for the end of lunch for the Upper Juniors, they had all run shrieking for the playground as usual. But now noone is hopscotching or playing Tag Hand of Doom or hanging off the adventure frame. Eighty-seven pairs of unfriendly eyes are trained on Olly.

Asif's eyes, ice-blue and sly, flick to the audience appreciatively.

'Easy-peasy for Barking!' he says in the kind of voice people use for babies, and he makes the toss especially slow.

'I don't think he *can* use his hands.' adds Murray, picking the cap from the air. He sends it back in exaggerated slow motion. 'Cept maybe to *suck his thumb*.'

'Just get it, Olly!' shout the lawn-children. 'What are you thinking? What are you waiting for? Olly?'

But he no longer sees the other children, no longer hears their taunts, because the girl has come. And the girl comes to him alone. Not a single other person in the world knows about her. She is standing in front of him: a slender brown-skinned elfin girl. She is quite naked except for a leather apron around her waist, leg rattles tied to her calves and the small moons carved from ostrich shell that she likes to wear on a string across her forehead.

'*Ndlovu*,' she says.

Ndlovu is his other name – not Oliver, his real name, or Barking, his teasing name, but his other name which comes from a far, far place. He doesn't want the name and he doesn't want *her*. As gentle as she is, in her own way she is also a bully.

*'Ndlovu.'*

'Leave me!' he orders her. His voice is sharp, although to the watching children he makes only a senseless mumble. 'Get away from me!'

She sighs and shifts, so that her leg rattles make a subdued music as the dried berries clatter in the hide pods.

*'But Ndlovu – the time is coming when you have to make a choice.'*

'Get away!'

And he concentrates every resource he has – every last bit of resistance and determination he can muster - into forcing her out.

With the girl flung away, he finds himself back in the playground. The cap flies past again, so low now he feels the wind of its passage through the sluggish summer air. A giddy lightness comes into him, as if he himself is made from air. The playground has gone bright and filmy and the shapes of it – the adventure frame, the lawn, the tall, laughing, intimidating boys are melting into each other.

A terrifying panic builds in him. He so much doesn't want the gentle girl, doesn't want the name from a far place, doesn't ever want to make a choice. But she won't leave him alone. And every time she comes, it gets harder to make her go! The fear makes his legs tremble and he crumples onto the tarmac.

'Hey Barking!'

'Barking?'

But he is already gone.

## EMMA AND CHRISTOPHER: THE DISCOVERY

Emma and Christopher Bentley were looking at a picture of a man. The picture was on a dating website, where lonely grown-ups who wanted to fall in love could look for other lonely grown-ups with the same idea. Emma and Christopher's mother was a member of the dating website, which was called 'Second Time Lucky.' As far as Emma and Christopher could tell, the 'Second Time Lucky' website seemed to be specifically for people who had children, but no wives or husbands. Everyone on the website, much like Emma and Christopher's mother, seemed to have lost theirs somewhere along the way.

Emma and Christopher hadn't known any of this until eight minutes ago, when they had decided to spy on their mum by looking at her internet browser history. They weren't very happy to know it now.

The man had short, close-cropped blond hair and very blue eyes. The funny thing, although not so funny from Emma's and Christopher's perspective, was that he looked a bit like their dad, in having blonde hair and blue eyes. Or for that matter, a bit like Christopher himself. Except the man had a different smile from Dad – more of an eye-crinkling-but-not-so-much-in-the-mouth smile. Dad smiled a lot, and when he did, he flashed the top and bottom rows of his big square fabulous teeth. Everyone agreed Dad had fabulous teeth, particularly for England where there were plenty of crooked teeth to be found. Not that it mattered any more because nowadays Dad and his teeth were far away in California in the United States of America. Their dad was a sports journalist. He had left for California six months ago for a temporary sports job, writing about football. Proper English football, not the American kind that was more like rugby. They called proper football 'soccer' over there. He hadn't been in the soccer writing job long when he got really friendly with a woman who managed a girl's soccer team. As Dad told it, the football manager and Dad got to be better and better friends until they realized they were soulmates and meant to be together forever.

What he didn't say but what Emma and Christopher eventually came to understand, was that he wasn't coming back. He wanted his new girlfriend and America more than he wanted Emma, Christopher, Mum or England. So there was going to be a divorce now.

It hadn't even crossed their mind that their Mum might want anything apart from getting used to being divorced and Dadless. But apparently she did.

The man on the computer who looked a bit like Dad, but wasn't Dad, was wearing a khaki shirt, with a pair of binoculars slung round his neck. In the background you could see a lot of yellow grass in what looked like a field. Underneath the picture was a box of writing.

**PROFILE:** (they read) **Jack From Africa**

Emma and Christopher exchanged apprehensive glances. Mum's diary was downstairs where she always left it, on the island in the kitchen next to the telephone. It was usually full of things like: 'Dentist 3:30 for kids. Pick up straight from school/ remember toothbrushes and paste!!' But when they had rifled through it earlier this evening, they'd noticed it also said 'Jack' in six different places. Next to each Jack, were other words: 'Four Seasons Chop Suey Palace' and 'Bella Italia.' And one of the Jacks was written in the space for this exact evening and Mum was out, yet again. Emma figured the other words had to be the names of restaurants. That was why Emma and Christopher were now upstairs in the spare room that doubled as Mum's study, snooping through her browser history.

'You kids all right?' shouted the babysitter up the stairs.

'Yes!' yelled Emma back, a bit thickly. She always got a cold when the winter broke and this year was no different. 'I've already told you. Mum said to finish our homework and not bother you.'

They turned back to Mum's Mac to see what the Jack From Africa man thought he was up to.

**Name: Jack.**

**Age: 42**

**Area Of Residence: Finchley although I was born and grew up in South Africa.**

Emma's head bobbed up.

'Finchley! Like us!'

'Shhh,' said Christopher. 'I'm trying to concentrate.'

**Career: I'm an ornithologist (I study birds.) I lecture at the University of London Institute of Biological Sciences.**

**Favourite Pastimes: Hiking, camping, bird-watching. My work takes us to Africa a lot, on safaris and expeditions, to learn more about birds and their habitats. We go to Africa whenever my son has a holiday from his school.**

**Qualities that I think are most important in a partner: Courage and honesty. I only want to be with someone who could learn to love my boy like her own child because he's never had a mother.**

**My family situation: I loved my late wife very dearly but ten years ago she died giving birth to my son, Oliver. Since then it's been just me and my son and we've taken care of each other. Now I think it's time to move on.**

Underneath the profile box was another box titled 'My Impressions.' That meant Mum's impressions, not the man's. You could tell because there was a little 'Save' button in the corner of the box. Mum had already typed and saved:

Seems like a lovely, lovely, lovely, lovely man. Boy, I could do with one of those.
--

For a while nobody said anything. They didn't look at each other. Then Christopher said, his voice a little croaky:

'How many lovelies is that?'

Emma crunched up her nose, which was still moist and reddish from the end of her spring cold. She'd been holding her breath and now she exhaled whistly pipes of air.

'Too many,' she said. 'Way too many.'

'So what does ... what does that mean?'

'Mum's got a boyfriend.' said Emma. 'Jack. Jack is Mum's boyfriend. She's been out with him five times already and she's out with him right now.'

Christopher's big pastel-blue eyes met Emma's narrower green rimmed-with-brown-and-flecked-inside-with-brown-too eyes. The two pairs of eyes locked.

It was a staggering discovery.

It was the answer to the mystery. They'd known there was a mystery. For months and months after Dad vanished Mum had moped around the house in a stained tracksuit and greasy hair. She took time off work but their house fell apart anyway, with dirty laundry piling up in the baskets, and black bags and recycling making embarrassing mountains of waste in their front yard. And then suddenly a few weeks ago she had cheered up and got back in her neat work blouse and skirt and washed her hair and the laundry and taken all the bags and recycling to the tip. And started going out in the evenings even though it wasn't Parent Consultations or Charity Quiz Fish And Chips Night at school. It was obvious something was going on.

Christopher broke eye contact first by blinking.

It wasn't fair to be cross with Emma. That's just how Emma was. Ideas came easily to her. But still, Christopher said furiously:

'I wish you had never said we should look on her computer!'

He jumped up, pushing back his chair. The chair fell backwards and he stumbled over one of its wooden legs as he ran out of the spare room. He headed into their bedroom, slammed the door behind him and locked it.

Emma followed him. She could hear him sobbing, even though he was two years older than her.

'Chris?'

'Go away!'



Emma made her way downstairs. The babysitter was reclining on the sofa, eating Hob Nobs from a packet and watching a TV drama.

'Everything okay?'

Emma ignored her, went into the kitchen and picked up the telephone from its base on the island. Mum had made them learn her mobile number off by heart years ago when they were still little. Emma punched the number onto the phone keypad.

Mum picked up at once.

'Betty? What's wrong?' Betty was the babysitter's name.

'It's me,' said Emma 'We know about Jack.'

'Oh!'

'Christopher's upstairs in his room crying. He's very upset.'

'Oh dear!'

'You had better come home at once,' said Emma, severely.

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Forty-five minutes had passed by the time Mum came through the front door. Christopher had already cried himself to sleep. Emma, on the other hand, had never been more awake in her life.

Mum paid Betty and saw her out the front door. She came back into the living room where Emma was waiting for her, and sat down opposite Emma on the sofa.

'How did you find out about Jack?'

'I looked at your internet history on the computer.'

Mum sighed.

'Emma – that's just not right. It's prying. It was an invasion of my privacy.'

'But we didn't know where you've been going,' said Emma tightly. 'You never say anything. You just go and you come back acting weird.'

'I was going to tell you,' protested Mum. 'But just not yet. I wanted to wait until ... I got used to it myself.'

Emma's lips thinned.

'Well, now you know.' Mum cocked her head to one side and scrunched up her nose, much like Emma often did herself, 'Since you know, you might as well tell me what you think about it.'

'I think it's disgusting!'

'Is that you, Mummy?'

Christopher had woken up.

'Chris, come down here. I'm just talking to your sister.'

Christopher appeared with swollen eyes and wild hair, sheet wrinkles imprinted on his cheek.

'Oh Cistoppa. Come here, sweetheart. Come closer, Ebba.'

Those were their dumb baby names from when they were babies and couldn't say Christopher and Emma properly. Mum hardly ever used them anymore – only when something disappointing happened, like Emma not being chosen to represent Year 4 for School Council, or Christopher having tonsillitis for the day of the All Barnet Schools Football Fananza. And now.

Mum shuffled up next to Emma, and Christopher sat down on the other side of her. She put her arms around him and he leaned against her.

'Is it really the very worst thing in the world if I spend some time with a man who isn't your father?'

Neither of them replied. Mum sighed again.

'Do you want to know anything about Jack?'

'We read all about him already,' said Emma bitterly. 'He studies birds. He's from South Africa. He likes hiking and camping and bird-watching.'

Mum nodded.

'That's all true. But he's also a parent. And that's just as important to him as it is to me. He has a son.'

'We know that too,' said Emma.

Mum sank back on the sofa, still cuddling Christopher so that he sank with her. She didn't say anything for a while but just kept tapping her pointy canine teeth on the left side of her jaw together which was something she did when she was being thoughtful. At last she said:

'I don't know how you're going to feel about this but it's probably better just to tell you everything now that you know about Jack. No more secrets. Part of the reason I didn't say anything was because – well, because it was too soon – but also because – funnily enough, coincidentally – I think you probably know his son. Or know of him. He also goes to Finchley Central Primary.'

Christopher straightened up.

'Who?' they both cried.

'His name's Oliver. Olly – he's mostly called Olly. Their surname is Beyers. Olly Beyers. *Do you know him?*'

Emma's eyes sprang open. Christopher's jaw dropped. They glanced at each other in consternation.

'Olly Beyers!' Emma breathed. 'Mum – *everyone* knows about Olly Beyers. He's the weirdest kid in the whole school.'

## **BARKING BEYERS**

Olly Beyers was in Year 5, sandwiched between Christopher in Year 6 and Emma in Year 4. Finchley Central Primary was a small primary school with only one form to each year, and Emma and Christopher knew everyone in the Upper and Lower Juniors by name. But up until last year, when Olly did what he did in the Upper Juniors playground and became the subject of a Special Assembly, they had only been aware of him in the vaguest way, as a weirdie joke person. Now, of course, everyone at Finchley Central Primary, down to the littlest nipper in Reception, knew exactly who Olly Beyers was.

It was difficult to even know where to start in describing all the things that were wrong with Olly Beyers. With Barking. That's what he got called sometimes and it wasn't hard to see why.

Because boy, was he barking! But Mum needed to know, and she needed to know fast, so Christopher and Emma did their best.

First of all, before you even got to his behaviour, there was how he looked.

'He doesn't look like anyone else at Finchley Central Primary,' said Christopher.

'He doesn't look like anyone else in Finchley!' added Emma.

Olly was mixed race – but that didn't set him apart – there were lots of mixed race kids at school. It was just his whole look. His dark eyes slanted and he had high very prominent cheekbones as if two small hard apples rested there just under the surface of his skin. Beneath the apple-cheeks his mouth was funny too: a very full brown-pink rosebud that belonged properly on a girl, not a boy. He was always pursing his lips too, making his mouth even fuller and pinker and more girlish. And he was skinny. And his ears stuck out!

So that was how he looked. But then there was how he acted. He didn't join in. He was always off by himself. He'd go down to the alley between the Year 4 and Year 5 classrooms with a book in his hand – even when it was freezing and everyone else was charging about trying to warm up. And he'd squat there amongst the leaf debris and read his book. Sometimes he didn't even take a book. He just talked to himself. You'd see him there in his alleyway, his funny rosebud mouth moving

away, forming words in a conversation with nobody. In one way it was good that he talked to himself because he certainly didn't talk to other people much. And when he did, even that was strange because he had a slow husky throaty way of speaking that didn't fit in the least with his girly, skinny body. The contrast made you laugh. Olly Beyers got teased *a lot*.

So up until last year that was what Olly Beyers was to Emma and Christopher – an odd thin deep-voiced slant-eyed solitary little boy who lurked in an alleyway and kept to himself. A person definitely best ignored. But last summer a bizarre thing happened that threw a spotlight on Olly and established his notoriety forever.

It was lunchtime and the sun was shining so everyone was out playing in the Upper Juniors Playground. Emma never saw what happened because she was still only in Year 3 in Lower Juniors then, and they had their own playground.

Olly Beyers had struck off as usual for his alleyway. But as he crossed the playground two boys called Murray Hicks and Asif Ghaffari came shooting down the slide and grabbed Olly's school cap with the school emblem on it. Murray and Asif were in Christopher's year, not the oldest in the school then, but they were the biggest and definitely the meanest and you didn't mess with them.

They started tossing Olly's cap back and forth and shrieking:

*'Oh Mrs Bri- iggs! Olly Beyers is outside without his cap! Mrs Bri-iggs!'*

Mrs Briggs was the headteacher. There was a temperature gauge in her office and on days when it registered above twenty degrees Celsius she put a notice up on the front door.

**TODAY IS A CAP DAY. ALL PUPILS MUST WEAR THEIR SCHOOL CAP OUTDOORS AT ALL TIMES.**

She was very strict about it too. If you had forgotten your cap, she issued you with a horrible old possibly nit-ridden one from Lost Property. And if she caught you uncapped outdoors she sent you inside to the Thoughtful Chairs outside the secretaries' office to finish your lunch break there.

Murray and Asif were forever grabbing people's caps on Cap Days and pretending to call Mrs Briggs. They thought that was hilarious. Generally they would throw the cap back and forth while the victim begged and made desperate

lunges for it. Eventually they'd get bored and throw the cap to one side on the tarmac, or the lunchtime supervisor would notice and put an end to it. Today though the lunchtime supervisor was cusp-of-retirement ancient warty Miss Knox who never noticed a thing.

In any event Olly Beyers wasn't lunging and begging like anyone else would have done. He stood very still and his dark eyes switched left and right as he watched his cap fly over his head. He didn't say anything. Murray and Asif started to get bored and threw the cap in such slow wide arcs that a kid in the Infants could have reached up and picked it from the air. They wanted Olly to reclaim his cap now so they could go back to sliding and other fun pursuits. But they couldn't lose face by actually giving the cap back to Olly, and throwing it onto the tarmac wouldn't seem triumphant without Olly doing at least some lunging and begging.

A square of lawn flanked one side of the playground. Christopher had been practising football freestyle tricks on the grass with a group of his friends. But they all stopped trying to get the Reverse Crossover right and started watching Murray and Asif and Olly's performance instead. Lots of people were laughing. Christopher actually felt sorry for Olly. But there was nothing you could do about it.

'Oh *c'mon* Olly – get on with it.' groaned Christopher's friends. It was amazing that Olly didn't understand how Murray's and Asif's rules worked. Everyone else did.

And then Olly did something odd, even for Olly. He made a gruff, indistinct, strangulated mumble and then he fell down. At first they assumed he had tripped over his shoelace. That was another oddity about him – he wore shoes with shoelaces like in the olden days instead of shoes with Velcro straps. So he could have tripped on one of his laces. But he didn't get up.

'Hey Barking!' Murray chucked the cap at Olly's head.

'Barking?' They both strolled over to peer at Olly on the ground.

Murray looked up:

'Hey, come check this out!'

Everyone stopped playing Tag Hand of Doom and hopscotching and scrambling on the adventure frame. A circle formed around Olly.

Olly had got himself into the oddest position. He'd shut his eyes. His chin and arms and legs were pulled tightly against his body, almost as if he was pretending to be a soldier in a drama class. He moaned loudly.

'Is he faking?'

'I don't know!'

At that moment Olly's eyes opened. They had rolled so far back in his head that only a small brown hemisphere showed in each eye socket, and lots of white. His arms and legs jerked out of their soldier position and starting flailing wildly around, smacking the tarmac.

Everyone jumped back. Murray used a word that got you half an hour in Mrs Brigg's office if you were overheard saying it. One of the Year 6 girls said:

'It's a fit! I'll get Mrs Briggs.'

Mrs Briggs and the school first-aider came running out of the corridor door. They stared at Olly. Mrs Briggs stepped forward.

'No wait,' said the first-aider putting her hand out to stop Mrs Briggs. After a minute or two Olly stopped jerking about. Now he just looked asleep, but very asleep. The first-aider picked him up which wasn't difficult because he was so light. His dark bony little arms and legs hung limp and rag-dollish against the cream of her dress. She carried him inside followed by Mrs Briggs.

Olly didn't come to school the following day. At nine o'clock after the register had been taken, their teachers told them to stand up from their tables again. A Special Assembly had been called for the Upper Juniors.

Mrs Briggs stood in the centre of the stage in the Main Hall. She looked very serious.

'You will all be aware of what happened in the Upper Juniors' playground yesterday.'

There was a buzz.

'Quiet! Oliver Beyers has been diagnosed with a medical condition known as epilepsy. Epilepsy causes seizures like the one you saw yesterday. It's not something you can catch so none of you need worry about that. Oliver will be returning to school tomorrow. He's had a big shock and he might not want to

answer any questions about his epilepsy just yet. If you have a question, you must ask one of the teachers, not Oliver. If I hear that anybody has teased Oliver at all' – at this point she let a very hard gaze settle on Murray and Asif' – they will be punished most severely.'

She paused.

'As I said, Oliver is going to be back at school tomorrow. It is very possible that he might have another seizure. We are all responsible for helping to keep Oliver safe and well, and every single one of you needs to know exactly what to do if you see that Oliver is having a seizure. Mrs Clifford is going to teach you correct procedure now. Into threes!'

Mrs Clifford was the school first-aider. The next half-hour was the most tremendous fun. One person had to play Olly Beyers and the other two had to be themselves. Every ten minutes they switched roles. The pupils playing themselves had to pretend to move all hard objects and furniture from Olly so that Olly couldn't knock into anything and hurt himself. If Olly was standing up they had to ease him slowly to the floor and arrange his body into a special position on his side called the recovery position. After that, they weren't to touch or interfere with or try to hold Olly at all, and they most certainly must not attempt to put anything in Olly's mouth which some of their parents might suggest but which was in fact an old-fashioned and dangerous theory. One of the helpers was to run for Mrs Clifford while the other person stayed with Olly, talking to Olly in a calm cheerful voice about calm cheerful things. While they practised all of this the teachers strode amongst them, snapping at Ollys who were doing too much jerking and eye-rolling, or fighting their helpers while they were being eased into the recovery position.

Olly returned to school and they all watched him hopefully but disappointingly he refused to have another seizure and let them put their training into practise. In any event it was summer holidays not long after that: their very last family holiday together ever before Mum and Dad split up.

After the holiday, it was back to school for Emma and Christopher. School finished at three but they did the After Care Programme until six, because their mum worked as a doctor in a nearby surgery and couldn't pick them up earlier.



After Care was things like ballet and football and pottery but for the last hour and a half you had to do Homework Club. Olly was in After Care as well.

Once they were back from holidays, Emma was an Upper Junior too. Homework Club for the Upper Juniors was in the Main Hall, at long rows of tables and chairs which they had to drag out in the beginning and stack away at the end. Olly was quiet in Homework Club, not passing notes and playing noughts and crosses and hangman like the others. He just bent over his books and scribbled, making him and Emma the only people in the history of Homework Club ever to actually do some homework. But, unlike Emma, his studiousness didn't seem to pay off. He was a middling student, not bright enough ever to get an Amazing Achievement Certificate at Assembly but not dim enough to get one for Excellent Effort either. He did have several more fits at a school during the autumn and winter but apparently he'd learnt by now to tell when a fit was going to happen. He'd stand up from the classroom or his alleyway and trot off to the sick room and have his fit there behind closed doors. He didn't even have to ask permission to leave the room if it was a lesson, and he was allowed to stay on the couch in the sick room until he was collected. Everyone felt cheated.

Now that Emma and Christopher thought about it a weird thing had happened with Olly Beyers only last week. They'd been at Homework Club and the hands on the big clock up on the wall in the Main Hall had finally slid into place at ten to six.

The homework supervisor had looked up and said:

'All right everybody, chairs and tables away please.'

There was the usual ferocious clatter and din and stupid boys (including Christopher) pretending the tables were freight trains and scraping the wooden floor. After putting the tables and chairs away they had to pick up their schoolbags and line up – Year 4, Year 5, Year 6 – so they could march out to their waiting parents when the clock moved to six and the homework supervisor announced Dismissed.

'Dismissed!'

Emma marched first because she was Year 4 but she always waited a couple of minutes just outside the Main Hall doors for Christopher to catch up so they could go out to Mum together otherwise Christopher got in a mood. This time, however, who in the world had stepped out of the march and halted beside her except Olly Beyers!

‘Hullo Emma? How are you?’

Olly Beyers didn’t speak to people and he wasn’t even in her year! Emma eyed him doubtfully.

‘Uuum – I’m fine, Olly. How are you?’

‘I’m also fine, thank you.’

A silence followed. Olly didn’t move on. Christopher arrived, and fell out of the march next to Emma, as usual. Unbelievably, Olly started up with him too.

‘Hullo Christopher. How are you?’

Both Christopher and Emma were in their tracksuits, Emma because of ballet and Christopher because of football. Christopher was cool at school but he was most cool when he looked exactly like he did now – in his tracksuit after football, smelling a bit of sweat and a bit of mud underneath the fleece.

Christopher looked surprised. ‘Okay,’ he said uncertainly. He glanced over his shoulder at where the rest of the march was still filing out of the Main Hall. Murray Hicks was just coming through the doors.

‘Cheers then,’ said Christopher very quickly and made a movement with his head to show Emma to get going. They headed off to find Mum. As they rounded the corridor corner Christopher flicked a very quick peek back at Olly. Olly was looking down now, at his shoelaces, and for the rest of the evening Christopher didn’t feel completely comfortable. But by morning it was forgotten and neither Christopher nor Emma had thought about that weird moment again, until now.

\*

Mum had listened to the whole story about Olly carefully, without interrupting. But her face had grown sad and she slumped further into the sofa and all the twinkliness emptied out of her pretty brown eyes.

‘So he gets teased because he’s epileptic?’

'No!' said Emma 'Other kids have got stuff wrong with them and they don't get teased. Sasha Bird has got really bad asthma and she has to carry an inhaler and she doesn't get teased. Rhys Evans has diabetes and he has to carry a special injecting pen around and inject it in his arm at lunchtime and that's actually gross to watch but he makes a joke about it and he *never* gets teased. Because they're normal. But Olly's just weird. He was weird before the epilepsy.'

'If it got out, Mum, that you were having suppers with his Dad,' Christopher closed his eyes, 'I don't even want to think about the consequences.'

'That's a good word, Chris, consequences,' said Mum absently. She ran her fingers through her hair and blew some air out between her lips.

'Well?' pressed Emma.

Mum looked at Emma and then Christopher. She sighed again and turned her arm to bring her wristwatch into view.

'You two had better go to bed. It's nearly eleven o'clock. I need to call Jack.'

'I'm sorry, Mum,' said Emma. 'I know you liked him.'

'Hmmm,' said Mum. 'Don't forget to brush your teeth.' She stood up and went into the kitchen. Emma and Christopher made their way obediently upstairs, brushed their teeth, splashed water on their faces and got into bed.

They shared a bunk bed but because they were always fighting over who had the top bunk, Mum made them swap every three days to be fairs-fair. It was Christopher's turn in the top bunk tonight. Christopher was good at falling asleep minutes after his head touched the pillow but Emma heard him shift above her and shift again a while later.

'You still awake, Chris?'

'Uh huh.'

'That,' said Emma soberly 'was almost a *big* disaster.'

## A DREAM

*The young girl wears only a small skin apron, ornamented with white discs carved from ostrich egg shell. Circling her head is a string of the same shell moons. She wears a necklace of dried berries and beads and in the hollows of her throat rests a pendant. Over her shoulder is slung a skin bag, the wooden shaft of a digging stick showing at the top. Her feet are bare but when she sinks to her knees in the red, sandy soil, Olly sees that the soles are heavily padded with callouses.*

*She shifts the bag from her shoulder and reaches inside. She pulls out the digging stick and starts to probe the sand. Her movements are quick and exact as if she has done this many times. While she is digging, his eyes wander over the rest of the landscape – the dry river bed where the young girl kneels and the scattered thorn trees, amongst them one very tall thorn tree strewn with curious grey pods like half-moons. Camelthorn, he remembers. He has seen them before with his father, on holidays.*

*She has unearthed a brown, hairy bulb. She reaches into her bag again and pulls out a knife. She cuts away the top part of the root and discards the shavings in the sand. She drops the remaining flesh of the root into her bag and sits back on her heels. She looks slyly over her shoulder. She has known all the time that he was watching her.*

*'Hello Oliver. I was right, wasn't I? I knew the root was in this place.'*  
*Her eyes are dark and slanted, her mouth full and always half-smiling, her cheekbones high and prominent. He understands her, even though she doesn't say the words in English. She speaks her own language – unlike any other – a language of clicks and soft sounds. It is the right language for this place of red earth and thorn trees just as her face, which seems both unusual and familiar, is the right face.*

*'Follow me,' she says.*

*He trails behind her along the course of the river bed, aware of how she pays no attention in her bare feet to the sand he can feel burning even through his trainers. She stops.*

*'Look at this.'*

*It is a small shrub with spreading stems growing only an inch or two above the sand. Nestling between the blue-green leaves are tubular flowers of a deep mauve-pink with a yellow and white throat.*

*'Remember this flower. It is from a plant which makes a very good medicine for fevers. When you see it again the flower will not be there. Only a picture of it and far from where it grows. But the medicine will be saved. And you must take it.'*

*He nods.*

*'You will remember. You are like me. Once you learn a medicine plant, you never forget it.'*

*She is still smiling but her face has grown serious too. He feels flattered at the compliment but he also begins to be afraid now because he knows what she will ask.*

*'Come with me, Oliver.'*

*He shakes his head.*

*'It is the beginning for you. You have so much to learn.'*

*He shakes his head again. He whispers, 'No, Sanna. I don't want to.'*

*Now she looks sad. She dips her own head and reaches behind her neck. She loosens the necklace, and holds the pendant out in the palm of her hand. He stares at the little ivory oval, and the figure of the elephant carved there.*

*'It is all right,' she says 'The tusk was from an animal that died at the end of its life. We never hunt this animal. This animal is like a person for us.'*

*He nods. She's told him before.*

*'Take it.' Then she calls him by his other name, the name that is not from this red desert where she lives, or the busy city where he lives. The chosen name for him.*

*'It is meant for you. Come with me. Take it, Ndlovu.'*

*'NO!' He pushes Sanna's hand away, and the pendant spins up in the air, turning in slow motion, so he sees now the elephant etching, now the blank back, and the elephant again and the back again, and behind the spinning pendant the young girl still watching him. And then a tunnel of air, and the feeling of being sucked rapidly backwards, and a strong sweet smoky smell, and she calls to him:*

*'Ndlovu, Ndlovu ... don't run!'*

Olly Beyers slammed upright in his bed. He clutched his duvet to his chin and his eyes moved wildly over the dim silhouettes of his room, the model space craft and space shuttles hung on wires from the ceiling, the bookshelf and wardrobe. His pyjama top was damp with sweat and he was breathing hard but the sweet smoky smell had vanished along with his dream. In her night cage under her night cover, Kasuku clicked once or twice and shuffled on her perch but didn't fully wake up.

A shadow passed his window. He heard the front door of the flat open. Tata was back. He listened to his father greet his babysitter, Bea Williams, and Bea Williams's deep throaty cigarette-smoker's laugh and the sound of Bea Williams going out of the front door. She would stand in the corridor outside now and light one of her cigarettes with a great flourish because Tata didn't let her smoke in the flat when she looked after Olly but *Mr Williams*, three doors along didn't let her smoke in their flat either, or on their balcony.

He heard the sound of Tata making himself a whisky and ice in the kitchen and going through to the living room, and then the low hum of the television. He couldn't seem to fall asleep again. He lay in bed waiting for his eyelids to grow heavy, and thinking about the neighbours. Bea Williams's proposed visit to Australia to see her grown-up daughter, Denise Hooley's baby growing inside and the special ultrasound photographs of the baby the hospital took through Denise Hooley's skin that Denise Hooley showed him. There were fourteen flats in the block but so far Olly had been the only child living there. It was mostly retired people. If Denise Hooley's baby ended up being interested in space travel, Olly would help him or her to put together a model space craft.

The phone rang just as Olly was finally starting to feel drowsy. He rolled over and looked at his clock radio.

10.53 pm. A funny time for a phone call.

Tata picked up. Olly could only hear the odd word.

'How ... You're kidding!' Tata's deep laugh. 'Worked it out ... inevitable ... better perhaps ... Olly ...'

When he heard his own name, he got out of bed. He went down the little passageway and pressed his ear against the shut living room door. Now he could hear clearly.

'No, I told him a couple of weeks ago. Well, it was more like he told me. I think I was smiling and he said- you've met someone special, haven't you? He's intuitive like that.'

There was a silence. Then Tata said:

'We can make it work, Abby. I know we can.'

Another silence.

'I'll have a think about where to go. Some place with distractions that they'll all like. Okay. I ...' Olly sensed the pulse of feeling coming off Tata that meant Tata wanted to say something but was holding back, 'I'll ... see you. Bye.' Tata put down the phone, 'You might as well come in, Olly.'

Olly jumped. He turned the door handle. Tata lowered his tall frame and scrunched Olly's hair.

'How come you're up? Bad dream?'

Olly nodded.

'Want some chocolate milk?'

Olly nodded again. He followed Tata into the flat's kitchen. Tata lifted him onto the counter, grunting.

'Won't be able to do that for much longer.'

But Tata had been making the same silly remark for the last three years and he could still easily lift Olly. Olly asked:

'Was that the lady?'

'Yes.' Tata poured the milk into the mug and put the mug in the microwave. He set the timer.

'Olly - they've found out about me seeing Abby - Abby's children have.'

'Oh.'

The microwave made its busy noise, then beeped. Tata added chocolate powder, and passed the mug to Olly.

'What are they like, her kids?'

'She's really pretty and she gets Merit Awards and the Head Teacher's Golden Badge the whole time. He's the best in the school at football and everyone copies him a lot. They have loads and loads of friends.'

'Do they tease you?'

'No, they never tease me. They never speak to me.'

'Hmmm,' Tata scratched the side of his head. 'We thought we'd all go out together, on Monday, and do something fun. It's the teacher training day for your school so you're off. Abby and I can get off work too. We can all get to know each other better.'

Olly didn't respond.

'Ol - I really like Abby. I really like her a lot.'

'I know,' said Olly.

'Will you try with her kids? I'm not asking you to be their best mate. But will you try and talk to them?'

'Okay.'

Tata's eyes rested on him.

'You want to fetch your duvet and come and sleep on my bed?'

Tata still let him do that sometimes if he had a bad dream or more recently, since the seizures had started, if he suffered an episode during the day. But Olly shook his head.

'No. If Kasuku wakes up, she'll wonder where I've gone.'

'That's true,' said Tata.

When Olly had finished his milk they brushed their teeth together in the bathroom, peed in the toilet and got into their beds. After a few minutes Tata got up, crossed the corridor and tapped softly on Olly's door.

'Olly - those kids only know you from school. Once they get to know you outside school, they'll think you're terrific.'

Olly turned over on his side.

'No, they most definitely won't,' he said to himself.



## AT LONDON ZOO

Jack was at the wheel and Abby sat in the passenger seat. Olly was hunched on the left hand side of the car behind Abby. Christopher sat next to him and Emma was on the right hand side behind Jack.

They picked their way slowly down the Finchley Road because it was nine-forty five on a weekday morning and the city-bound traffic was still heavy. Olly was twisted right round with his face glued to the window as if he was captivated by the shops, the salt beef outlets and kosher delis of Temple Fortune, even the pharmacies and post office in Swiss Cottage. Christopher stared ahead at the gap through the seats and Emma kept closing her eyes. Since Jack had collected them from their house in 17 Paradise Crescent, Finchley, twenty minutes beforehand Emma and Christopher had said very little and Olly had said nothing at all. Abby, on the other hand, kept up a constant stream of chatter about the silliest subjects – how much she had enjoyed ballet as a girl, and Emma loved ballet too – *not that much*, interjected Emma disagreeably – wasn't it nice to have such a bright sunny day, she hoped the sunshine would hold til the afternoon and so on and so forth. Jack was quiet but every now and then he reached over and gave Abby a small, reassuring pat on her knee. From where Christopher sat Jack's hand was plainly noticeable and he gave each pat a very hard stare indeed.

They found a parking spot just outside the zoo entrance and Abby got out to put money in the metre. A tense silence prevailed in the car. Abby reappeared at the window.

'Three hours, that should do us, shouldn't it?'

'We can always top up later,' agreed Jack.

Three hours of this insanity. Emma closed her eyes again.

At the gates the queue wasn't long as the zoo had only just opened. Ahead of them were a bunch of mothers with small children who didn't attend school yet, and an assortment of tourists from various nationalities, but all with cameras slung around their necks, and bulging daypacks. As they waited a voice behind them howled:

'IN LINE! No jostling and no pushing! Gibbon! Partridge! I'll be watching you especially. *Partridge!* I said NO PUSHING!'

Twelve large boys – secondary school boys definitely – loomed around the corner. They wore grey flannel trousers and red sweatshirts emblazoned with the logo

### **BROADBARROW TECHNICAL COLLEGE**

The voice belonged to a tired-looking balding man at the head of the group, whom Emma guessed must be their teacher. He carried on with his stream of admonishments and threats as the queue shuffled forward but the boys didn't seem concerned. They put their square meaty hands in the small of each other's backs and gave one another shoves. The shoved ones yelled '*Sir, look at 'im, 'e's takin' liberties,*' – but seconds later they were shoving themselves.

Jack, Abby and the children were at the pay kiosk now. Jack and Olly were members but Abby bought tickets for herself and Emma and Christopher. The kiosk attendant handed them a pamphlet.

'Where should we go first?' asked Abby brightly.  
No-one had a suggestion.

'Chris? You're the eldest – you choose.'  
She handed him the pamphlet. He flicked his eye over the little map.

'Outback.' He handed the pamphlet back. Outback had to be the Australian section. He didn't know if he *did* want to see the Australian animals most of all. He only said it so they wouldn't go to the African part of the zoo first because Africa was connected to Jack and Olly Beyers, and he wasn't going to give them the satisfaction.

At the Outback they stared over the barrier at the wallabies, the shaggy-feathered emus and the curious black swans in their strange red and brown rock landscape. Abby filled them in on details about the birds and animals from the information placards, as if they couldn't read themselves. After she'd finished up with the last placard, she fell silent. She shot Emma an imploring look. Emma rested her chin on the railing and stared at a black swan.

'Let's go to the African bird safari,' suggested Jack 'It's just round the corner.'

They trooped after him. 'Just 'cos *he* likes birds,' muttered Emma to Christopher. 'Moron,' muttered Christopher back.

Jack ushered them through the hinged door of the bird enclosure. Inside the enclosure a raised walkway circled a fern-strewn pond. There were tree branches beside the pond. On the branches and on the roof of the enclosure squatted a dozen or so large, hunched birds. They had brown feathers tinged with a metallic pink, but a white belly and white underwings. On their cheeks stood patches of blue. They kept extending and retracting their wings.

'They're Admin's storks,' said Jack. 'You find them all along the East African coast. They migrate in huge flocks – sometimes up to ten thousand birds. It's quite something to see.'

Emma glanced at him. She'd stolen one or two peeks at his face in the rear view mirror on the car journey in to the zoo. It had looked tight and anxious and closed. But now something about him was altered. His blue eyes had become bluer. They shone.

As she was watching him, a much smaller bird alighted on his shoulder. This little bird was almost ridiculously pretty and colourful – a washed green head bobbed above a rich lilac throat and chest, sparkling violet wings offset a sea-green underbelly. Jack turned his head fractionally.

'Hey, little guy. What's the problem?'

'He's on your shoulder!' exclaimed Emma, despite herself. 'He likes you!'

'No, he doesn't,' Jack laughed. 'It's a lilac breasted roller. They're highly territorial. He's telling me not to even think about going anywhere near his nest.'

The bright little bird cocked its head and eyed Jack's ear speculatively, as if considering whether to peck it or not. Just at that moment a high cascading clatter of smashing glass echoed through the enclosure, followed by cries of alarm. The lilac breasted roller fluttered off Jack's shoulder. They looked around them but nothing appeared to have broken. The cries were dying down now. They sounded some way off.

Olly touched Jack's sleeve.

'Can we go and see her now please, Tata?'

‘Okay,’ said Jack. He looked over at Abby. ‘He wants to go to Into Africa. Is that okay? We can take in the Reptile House on the way.’

Abby nodded. They filed after Jack out of the bird enclosure, Abby and Jack first, Olly following, Emma and Christopher bringing up the rear.

‘Into Africa,’ whispered Christopher to Emma, rolling his eyes. ‘Idiot. He didn’t even ask what *we* wanted.’

‘But I would actually like to see the African animals,’ whispered Emma back. ‘And the Reptile House. They shot the snake scene in the first Harry Potter movie inside the Reptile House – you know, where Harry accidentally sets the snake on Dudley Dursly.’

‘That’s not the point!’ hissed Christopher.

They started to walk up the path that led to the African section. As they drew near the Reptile House, they became aware of a considerable commotion. Ahead of them on the path the group from Broadbarrow Technical School was being briskly shepherded towards the exit by their harassed teacher, now assisted by several of the zoo assistants in their green zookeeper fleeces. At the same time a line of zoo visitors trickled out from the gloomy Reptile House interior.

‘Never seen anything like it!’ the last visitor to be ushered out was saying hotly. She was rather plump, had on an oversized floppy flowered hat, quite needlessly given the watery March sunshine, and spoke with a strong American accent.

‘Absolute outrage!’ agreed her companion who was even plumper, ‘Behaving like animals!’ But this obviously wasn’t meant as a compliment. A zoo official appeared in the Reptile House doorway with its frieze of crocodiles, lizards, snakes and chameleons. He started taping red and white plastic ribbons across the frieze. Behind him, another couple of zookeepers were rushing back and forth. They seemed to be studying the floor.

‘Looks like the Reptile House is closed for now’, said Jack ‘Let’s just go straight to Into Africa.’

Abby stopped at the refreshment hut on the way to buy them all Cokes. After that, they dipped into the tunnel that ran under the Regent’s Park Outer Circle and

surfaced on the far side, near the African hunting dogs. For a while they watched the hunting dogs, with their big bat ears and mosaic coats. Then they moved on to the warthogs. A zoo supply truck and trailer came trundling past, laden with buckets and bundles of foliage. The truck pulled up outside the roofed shelters and the driver got out and started to unload his supplies.

The warthogs were trotting about officiously, their grey bristle-tipped tails sticking straight up into the air. Christopher caught sight of them and spluttered his mouthful of Coke.

Emma wiped a Coke spot from her arm.

'What's so funny?'

'Honestly Em – who do they remind you of?'

Emma couldn't think.

'Mrs Briggs!'

She laughed for the first time that day. It was true. With their scooped faces, warty facial protuberances, small suspicious eyes and train of wispy pale hair down their backs, the warthogs did bear an uncanny resemblance to the headmistress of Finchley Central Primary. It was a great relief to have a laugh after all the tension and not knowing what to say, and Christopher whispered 'Mrs Briggs!' again which set Emma off giggling again. Olly looked over at them and caught Emma's eye. She stopped laughing. He must think they were laughing at him, like all the other kids at school. It had to be just as rubbish for him as it was for her and Chris, them all stuck together while their parents went mad.

'It's not you,' she said 'It's the warthogs. They look just like ...'

'Warthogs,' interrupted Christopher. Emma glanced at him, wondering why he had said something so thick, and he shook his head at her slightly and raised his eyebrows. He was right, she realized, Olly wouldn't even have found the comparison funny. He was in Mrs Briggs's office every five minutes because of his fits. Emma had even seen him holding her hand once as he came out, at his age!

They rounded the corner, arriving at a square grass-tufted paddock.

'This is Olly's favourite' said Jack 'He usually insists on visiting her as soon as we get through the gates.'

At first they couldn't see what Jack meant but when they turned the next corner of the square there it was. In front of them stood the most beautiful and unusual creature – quite unlike any animal Emma or Christopher had ever seen before. It was about the size of a small horse or pony but with a slight slope to its back. Its swollen belly and back were a dark glossy chestnut brown but zebra-like stripes ran up its legs and hindquarters. Its head was shaped a bit like a giraffe's, with furry horns and a long creamy jaw. It had enormous ears with dark fur tips and a delicate tracery of raised veins, the fur at the neck and below the ears showing narrow parallel partings. The animal looked up and its depthless dark eyes rested on Emma. They were the gentlest eyes Emma had ever seen on any being, human or animal, in all her life.

'What is it?' she breathed.

'An okapi' said Jack, 'They come from the Congo, from the rainforests.'

'He's wonderful,' said Emma, in a hushed voice.

'He's jolly fat,' said Christopher.

'She,' said Olly unexpectedly, 'She's pregnant. She mated with a visiting okapi from the Berlin zoo.' He hesitated, his eyes moving between Emma and Christopher, and then went on, rushing his words a little, 'It's part of a breeding programme – they're highly threatened in the Congo because there is war there. She's almost finished her pregnancy. They're pregnant for about fifteen months. Her calf is due in May.'

Just then, a keeper emerged from the shelter. In one hand he carried a hessian sack. Under the other arm was tucked a large bundle of branches and foliage. As they watched he dropped the bundle at the base of a maple tree to the right of the paddock. He went over to a poplar tree a few yards away, and started to pull leaf cuttings from his sack which he packed into a wire basket hanging from the poplar. When the sack was empty he dropped it at the base of the poplar trunk, crossed back to the maple tree and picked up the bundle of branches again. He secured the bundle to the maple tree with a dog-clip and went back inside the shelter.

'Everything has to be hung up,' explained Olly softly. 'They're forest browsers. They can't feed from the ground. It's very difficult for them to bend their necks like that.'

The okapi trotted over to the maple tree. She reached up to the hanging browse with her neck. A very long purplish-grey tongue came curling out of her mouth, wound around a branch and deftly stripped the leaves and bark from it.

The American tourists who had been expelled from the Reptile House came round the corner. Their eyes lighted on the feeding okapi.

'Ooooh!' exclaimed the plump flower-hatted lady.

'Isn't she just a darling!' chimed her plumper companion.

Olly watched the okapi pulling at the browse. The morning so far had been such a spin of different emotions: shyness, insecurity, a desperate protectiveness of Tata whom Emma and Christopher seemed to dislike so much. He pressed close to the barrier and closed his eyes, feeling the nearness of the okapi, her pleasure in her feeding and her serene tired mother-pleasure in the growing calf she carried. Also, uniting Olly and the okapi, the mild promise of the sunshine after the long drear winter months just past.

And something else. A pulse. Bad. Not comfortable.

He opened his eyes. His gaze roamed over the okapi's deep brown hide up to the pale cream of her jaw. Her long prehensile tongue curled out again to collect another mouthful of leaves. She brought the leaves to her mouth and crunched luxuriously.

Uncomfortable. Afraid. *Danger.*

Suddenly Olly felt a sharp sting in his lip. He started and touched his lip. But the pain had vanished just as quickly as it had come. He shifted on his feet. The swell of dread seemed to wash over him and then draw him with it, like a sea tide, until all his attention was focused on a single point.

Emma nudged Christopher.

'Hey! Look at Olly!'

Olly had gone rigidly still, or would have been still, if he wasn't trembling so violently. His dark, slanty eyes were locked on the okapi. He drew short, ragged breaths.

'He's going to have a fit,' whispered Christopher 'Here!'

The flower-hatted American was trying to take a photograph of her companion in front of the okapi.

'A smidgen to the right please, sweetie,' she was saying, 'I'm not getting y'all in.'

Just at that moment, Olly's eyes unlocked from the okapi and dropped down to the unopened can of Coke in his hand. With surprising strength for someone so puny, he hurled his Coke hard at the okapi's flank.

Jack, Abby, Emma, Christopher, and the two American tourists gasped. The okapi snorted, jumped high on all fours, landed, wheeled around and trotted to the back of the enclosure.

'I can't believe it!' announced the flower-hatted lady. 'These British kids! They're all the same!'

'No discipline,' agreed her companion 'Not one iota!'

Jack had recovered himself: 'Oliver!' He strode over to Olly and grabbed his arm. 'Why did you do that!'

Olly paid him no attention at all. His eyes were riveted on the okapi again. The okapi was clearly very hungry. Keeping a wary eye on the humans, it ventured back over to the hanging browse.

Olly writhed in Jack's grasp.

'Let me go! It's in the leaves!'

'Olly, shhh, shhh, calm down,' Jack glanced at Abby, shaking his head. The keeper had come back out of the shelter, having heard the fuss. Emma and Christopher eyed each other in alarm. Olly did a lot of weird things at school but as far as they knew, he had never attacked anybody. He didn't even fight back when he got bullied.

'IN THE LEAVES!' screamed Olly, 'LET GO OF ME! IT'S IN THE LEAVES!'



'Olly, *calm down*. It's just one of your scary thoughts. Think about something else. Look at me, Olly.' Jack hugged the struggling, wriggling boy close to him. 'I'm so sorry,' he said over Olly's head to the keeper. 'I can't think what's got into him. Abby, let's go.'

He lifted Olly up. The okapi shot the humans one last mistrustful look and reached her soft muzzle up to the browse.

'NOOO!' Olly punched Jack on the sensitive part of the side of his head. Jack staggered back and dropped him. Olly scrambled up the fence, vaulted over and dropped into the ditch on the far side. He scrabbled up the side of the ditch and, before anyone could stop him, he threw the full weight of his little body against the okapi's neck.

The okapi snorted and galloped away. Olly dropped into a near crouch, from which position he sprang up and got his hands on the bottom of the browse bundle. He clawed his way up the bundle until he reached the dog-clip which he unclipped. Olly and the big bundle of leaves and branches came crashing to the ground.

'Olly!' Jack shouted 'Olly, please!' The keeper, who had frozen in shock when Olly leapt over the fence, unfroze and started to advance on Olly. Olly darted out of his reach and began to kick the bundle apart. His first kick loosened the branches so that they scattered. He jumped into the middle of the scatter and kicked again and again.

A small grey stripe flashed out from the branches. The stripe zig-zagged over the earth towards the poplar tree. The keeper leapt back. Olly had stopped kicking the branches. He ran to the base of the poplar tree and picked up the hessian sack that the keeper had left there earlier. He turned to face the snake. The snake hissed, made a jerky movement and curled up. Olly dropped the sack on top of it, fumbled and picked the sack up again. He shook it once, as if to test the weight, tied a rough knot at the neck and flung it as far away from himself as his skinny arms could manage.

They all gaped at him, dumbfounded. He sunk cross-legged on to the sandy ground and burst into tears.

\*

'A long-nosed viper,' said the Reptile House keeper. 'They don't look very threatening but it's the most dangerous snake in Europe. If it had bitten the okapi she would probably have died. She would certainly have lost her calf.'

'It would have been devastating,' said the okapi keeper. 'The calf will only be the fifth born in Europe since we started the breeding programme eight years ago. We've been so excited.'

Olly took a sip from the large take-away cup of hot chocolate he held. He wasn't crying anymore but his eyes were still puffy and red. He looked a small and comical figure on the sofa where he sat, quite naked except for his socks and a pair of blue Super Mario underpants. Jack was kneeling in front of him, wiping a graze on his ribcage with a disinfectant tissue. Jack applied a plaster to the graze, to join the seventeen other Band Aids already sticking at odd angles to Olly's body.

After Olly had sat down on the ground in the okapi's cage, the okapi keeper had been the first to recover from his surprise. He called the Reptile House keeper on his walkie talkie. The keeper arrived within minutes and the viper was whisked away back to the Reptile House. The okapi keeper helped Olly up and led him out through the paddock and shelters. When he arrived on the far side, they saw that he was wincing. Jack unzipped Olly's jacket. There were streaks of blood all over his trousers and tee shirt. He'd grazed his chest, stomach and legs badly against the thorny undergrowth in the ditch, and climbing up the browse bundle.

The okapi keeper had led them to a private room behind the cafeteria, Jack carrying Olly. He produced a first aid kit from a cupboard, invited them all to sit down on the sofas and armchairs, went away and returned with a tray laden with biscuits, hot chocolate for the children and coffee for the adults. The Reptile House keeper arrived some minutes later, reporting that the long nosed viper was safely back in captivity.

'We were mystified,' the Reptile House keeper said, 'Completely mystified. Those jackasses on the school tour were horsing around in front of her cage, trying to bash each other in the head with their backpacks. One of them gave a hard swing, and the other one ducked, and the bag went straight through the glass. It had a pair

of dumb-bells inside apparently. We told their teacher to get them out of the zoo but the viper had vanished. Just vanished! It had only been a matter of seconds.'

'It's obvious now what happened,' continued the okapi keeper. 'Joe, our supplies driver, had parked the truck and trailer in front of the Reptile House while he went to drop off the dead mice and chickens around the back. He left the ramp down after unloading. The viper must have slithered straight out of the Reptile House when it saw its chance, up the trailer ramp, and buried into the browse bundle that was waiting for the okapi. They can move like lightening when they want to. And of course Joe came back from dropping off the feed, and drove the rest of the supplies over to Into Africa.'

'Do us a favour though, sonny,' said the Reptile House keeper to Olly, 'We're really grateful. Thank God for your sharp eye. If you want a job as a zookeeper ten years from now, it's yours. In the meantime, if you ever notice anything unusual at the zoo again, call a keeper! Don't sort it out yourself! You could very easily have been in hospital right now.'

Olly nodded. On the sofa opposite him, Emma's and Christopher's eyes met over their hot chocolates. The sofa was spacious but they were squeezed together in the middle of it. Emma looked away, down at her hands wrapped around the cardboard cup, and Christopher refocused his gaze on the ceiling.

Jack applied a final plaster and sat back on his heels.

'That'll do. Right, Olly Bolly. Finish up your chocolate. We should get what's left of you home.'

Olly struggled off the sofa and back into his trousers and trainers. His own tee shirt was just too blood-soaked to put back on but the okapi keeper found him a zoo tee shirt which said:

#### KEEPER FOR A DAY

You were supposed to be at least sixteen to be allowed to join the Keeper For A Day programme so the tee shirt would have been large on any ten-year-old. On Olly, it came to below his knees. But at least it didn't chafe his scrapes.

Jack thanked the keepers for the refreshments and the plasters, and they started to thread their way out through the cafeteria. As they passed the sign for the

men's room Jack said: 'Excuse us for a moment, Abby, Emma, Christopher.' He grabbed Olly's hand and pulled Olly after him into the men's room. All of the stalls and urinals were empty for the moment.

'Olly, I don't get it. I just don't get it. How did you know that the snake was in those branches?'

'I told you, Tata, I saw it.'

'Yes, I know, I know, you said you saw it moving. But Olly, I don't get it. It's a small grey-brown snake in the middle of a great big bundle of green-brown branches. It was completely hidden. I just don't get how you were so certain it was in there.'

'I saw it,' said Olly stubbornly. 'That's all.' He turned his head from Jack and ran his hand along the smooth marble counter top between the basins. Jack gave his son a final searching look. Then he clicked his tongue in exasperation, picked up Olly's hand again and dragged the boy after him back to the waiting Bentleys.

## DISNEYLAND IN JULY

The children had to go back to school on Tuesday, after the teacher training day. Christopher made a great point of avoiding Olly Beyers. It wasn't that difficult actually because of Olly's being in a different year, and because of his retiring habits. At Homework Club he hardly looked up from his books so there was little danger of catching his eye. Christopher managed to successfully avoid him for Tuesday and Wednesday. But on Thursday after dinner time he was coming backwards out of the corridor door that led to the Upper Juniors playground, scuffling with his mate Alfie Pattison, when he trod on something.

Alfie started to laugh.

'You just squashed Barking Beyers' foot!'

'It's okay,' said Olly. He turned and made for his alleyway. Alfie Pattison said '*Whoah-oh-oh here I go!*', jerked his arms a few times like a chicken's wings and made the whites of his eyes show. Christopher and Alfie went over to the adventure frame and hung by their legs from the monkey bars. From this upside-down position Christopher watched Olly arrive at his alleyway, settle down against the brick wall of the Year 4 classroom and reach into his schoolbag.

Christopher righted himself and dropped off the monkey bars.

'Back in a sec.' he said to Alfie Pattison. He put his hands in his pockets and strolled over to Olly.

'Hey!'

Olly already had his book out. He looked up at Christopher.

'What do you do here anyway?'

'Read my book,' said Olly 'It's quiet.' He looked back down at his book again.

'Hey!'

Olly looked up.

'Why do you call your father that funny name? *Tah-tah*. Why do you do that?'

'It's the word for father in Xhosa, my mother's language.'

'But why do you have to use a word from a foreign language. Why can't you just say Dad like everyone else? Why do you have to be different?'

Olly's eyes moved over Christopher's face.

'It's what my mother would have wanted me to call my father if she hadn't died,' he said finally, 'so that's what we use.'

In all the surprise of finding out about Mum and Jack, Christopher hadn't properly thought about the fact that Olly's mother was dead. What were you supposed to say if some-one mentioned a dead mother? He glanced back at Alfie Pattison who was watching him. He took a step closer to Olly and lowered his voice.

'Olly, please don't say anything about your father and my mother to anybody. Promise you won't.'

'I won't,' said Olly. 'Don't worry.' He opened the book and started paging through it to find the right place.

'It won't last anyway. She'll get back with my Dad soon. You'll see.' He waited for Olly to agree but Olly didn't say anything. A small panic bubbled in Christopher's stomach and swelled quickly into anger.

'I'll hit you if you do,' he growled. 'I swear I will. If we had a fight, I'd definitely win. I'm much bigger than you.'

'I know,' said Olly.

'She's our mum.'

'I know.'

'She's nothing to do with you!'

'I know.'

'Why is your dad even *bothering* her?'

'I think he was lonely,' said Olly.

'Well, why can't he pick some-one else's mum to stop being lonely with? Some-one who doesn't go to our school?'

'You know what?' said Olly suddenly. 'I would have liked that better too. But is there anything you think I can do about it?'

Christopher scowled. Olly found his place and settled his book on his knees. Christopher kicked some leaf debris, then turned away. As he turned he had a flash

of memory of how Olly had clung to the bundle of branches suspended in the air, even though he knew the viper was concealed inside. Olly's small foot in its thin trainer kicking the bundle apart. Christopher walked abruptly back to where Alfie Pattison was waiting.

'What were you talking to Barking about?' asked Alfie curiously.

'I was just telling him to get a life,' said Christopher.

\*

That evening Alfie Pattison's mum had offered to take Christopher and Alfie and some other boys out to a movie and Nandos because it was Alfie's birthday. Which meant it was just Abby and Emma having supper at 17 Paradise Crescent.

'Girls' night in,' said Abby cheerfully. 'Let's paint our nails. We could do a whole make-over.'

Ordinarily that's what they did if it was ever just the two of them, and they took photographs of the results and stuck them up on the fridge and it was fun. But now Emma just shrugged. There was no way she was letting Mum make her over, given what Mum was putting her through.

'Whatever.' She laid the table, which wasn't complicated, being just the two of them and some salad and a supermarket pizza. They ate in near silence. Neither Christopher nor Emma had said much to their mother all week.

Abby finished her pizza. Emma was done already. She didn't have much of an appetite and she'd left all the crusty bits.

Abby said: 'Em, can we just talk about it?'

Emma shrugged.

'Can you at least tell me what you think of him?'

Emma was about to shrug again. But then she found there was actually something that she wanted to say. She let her eyes slide towards Abby and spoke through thin, pressed lips.

'What *bewilders* me is how you can possibly be interested in that man after Dad.'

One of Emma's habits was to always have a favourite word, a newly discovered and more grown-up word that she was breaking in for regular use

alongside all her other words. This week's favourite word was 'bewilder.' She glared at Abby.

'Oh. Well - that's a start. What bewilders you precisely?'

'Mum - Dad used to be in all the papers. He had stuff in the papers all the time. Everybody had heard of him! And he had beautiful legs. Have you actually looked at Jack's legs? They're incredibly skinny - like a chicken's. And he's so quiet! Dad is hilarious. Everyone thinks so. He makes everyone laugh.'

'He didn't make *me* laugh, though, Em. Not for a very long time.'

'Well, whose fault is that? Maybe you should think about getting a sense of humour.'

Abby rubbed her eye with the palm of her hand.

'Emma, okay, yes, your dad was ... is charismatic. Yes, Jack is quiet, and yes, ornithologists don't make the biggest splash. I don't know about his legs. They look all right to me. It's been the winter so I've not seen them in a pair of shorts yet. But, Emma, how much do legs matter? Other things are so much more important! Your dad - ' she stopped, 'I don't want to criticize your dad to you. Later, when you're a young woman and you're thinking of getting engaged yourself, we can talk properly about why things didn't work out between your dad and me. But for now, Em, you've got this idea in your head it was all so perfect and it wasn't. Believe me, Em, it just wasn't.'

'There's nothing bad you can say about Dad! Dad is handsome and funny and successful and he's got loads of friends. Jack Beyers is just a loser who thinks watching birds is actually a job.'

Abby lost her temper. She answered in a voice that came close to yelling.

'It *is* a job! Bird species are threatened all over the world! It's a far more important job than scribbling nonsense about silly old cricket and rugby. And frankly Emma, as fabulous as your dad may be, he's a long way away in America and Jack Beyers is right here in Finchley!'

'Well that's too bad for you!' yelled Emma back with breath-taking rudeness, 'Because next week I'll be in America *with* Dad.'



That was true. They'd only seen their dad once since the split when he had visited briefly at Christmas. But next week was the school holidays and he'd already bought them tickets to visit him in California for a fortnight.

Just then the phone rang. Emma picked up.

'Hey Princess!'

'Dad! I was just thinking about you!'

'Were you, Princess? That's nice.'

It was amazing how close Dad's voice sounded, given that there was the Atlantic ocean and the whole of America between them. 'Hold on, Dad.' Emma put her hand over the receiver. She looked pointedly at her mother, 'Can I talk to my dad in private, please?'

Abby stood up and walked out of the kitchen. Emma heard her going upstairs. She told her father a bit about school and some of Christopher's news as well. She didn't say anything about Jack Beyers.

'Princess – I've been thinking – how would you like to go to Disneyland?'

'Disneyland?' Emma's stomach jumped with excitement 'Are you serious? I'd *love* it! Chris is going to *wet* himself. Is Disneyland in California?'

'Yes, it's only about an hour's drive away. But I thought we could do a little road trip and take in SeaWorld in San Diego as well. July is a brilliant time for road trips. We can stay in motels and eat pancakes for breakfast every day and holiday like proper Americans!'

'I ...' Emma stopped 'July?'

'Uh huh. Princess, something's come up I need to talk to you about. I'm ...'

'Dad – it's March.'

'Well, that's what I need to talk to you about. I'm ...'

Emma interrupted him.

'You're cancelling our holiday, aren't you?'

'Not cancelling, Princess, just postponing. I hate to do it but my hands are tied on this. The thing is, the Manx Cats, Chelsea's team, have just got a last-minute invitation to compete in Argentina. It's a fantastic chance and I'm covering the

whole tour. I would have invited you and Chris to Argentina but with the schedule it's just not realistic. In July ...'

Chelsea was Dad's new American football manager girlfriend. Emma put the phone down on its base. She stood next to the kitchen island for a moment, feeling a deep ache enter the back of her throat and nausea settle in her stomach. The phone rang again. She disconnected it.

'Mum!'

'Hold on,' came Abby's voice from upstairs.

'No – MUM!'

Abby came clattering down the stairs. She took one look at Emma's face and she didn't even ask what was wrong. She just plopped down into one of the dining room chairs and opened her arms. Emma crawled into them, like a five-year-old, and buried her head into the familiar jasmine smell of her mother's neck. She cried and cried for the longest time.

## OLLY'S DECISION

Olly had just settled into Homework Club at half past four when the homework supervisor called: 'Oliver Beyers!'

Olly looked up. The homework supervisor was beckoning to him and next to the supervisor stood Jack in the long grey raincoat he usually wore to do things out of doors. Olly glanced across at Christopher and Emma. They had noticed Jack too and were scowling. Olly put his books back in his schoolbag, hoisted the bag onto his shoulder and joined his father.

'Why are you here?' he asked as they made their way out of the school buildings.

'I only had a morning lecture today and this afternoon I kept looking out of my office window and noticing the sun getting brighter. Can you feel it? There's actually some warmth. It's a shame to waste it indoors. I thought I'd come and get you and we'd grab the bikes and take Kasuku for a spin along the Dollis Valley Greenwalk. It's light til nearly seven now.'

It was a beautiful bright day for March. Olly said:

'I thought you needed to work on your paper on the Pel's fishing owl.'

'That can wait. Besides, there's a limited amount I can achieve now before we go to Letaba.'

They were scheduled to leave for Letaba Camp in the Kruger National Park in South Africa as soon as term ended at Finchley Central Primary. Jack needed to conduct an observation of the courtship displays of the rare Pel's fishing owls that nested along the banks of the Letaba river. The birds would begin their displays as soon as the river levels started to drop after the South African summer rains, to make best use of the more concentrated fish resources while they were nesting their eggs and raising their chicks.

The Beyers' apartment block was about eight minute's walk from Olly's school. When they got there Jack went to fetch the bikes from the sheds in the communal gardens and Olly went up to the flat to collect his African grey parrot.

Kasuku was in her roomy day cage, a structure which ran the whole length of one wall of the living room. Jack had built the day cage himself, eight years ago when Kasuku first came to live with them as a chick. The day cage was full of food and water bowls, toys, swings, and perches at different levels and of varying widths so that the parrot wouldn't tire her feet constantly standing on the same kind of perch. It commanded a clear view out over the balcony and treetops, and into the communal gardens and the backyards of the adjoining houses.

'Kasuku! Fresh air outing!'

Kasuku was on the floor of her cage, playing with a colourful baby rattle Olly had bought her the week before. When she heard Olly's voice, she bobbed around, squawked 'Hello!Hello!' and put her head to one side. Her grey chest feathers vibrated which is one of the ways parrots show love. Olly loved Kasuku too: next to Jack he loved Kasuku more than anyone else. He put his hand in the cage so that Kasuku could hop onto his fingers.

Jack was waiting at the bottom of the stairwell with the bikes. Olly settled Kasuku into her bike basket, a special Kasuku expedition basket which Jack had helped him to craft. The basket had roof shaped wire mesh over the top with navy blue cloth pinned over the mesh leaving a kind of porthole at the front. Like most greys Kasuku was essentially sociable and playful. But in the wild she would have been a prey bird, hunted by hawks and other predators, and her wary instincts remained. The converted bike basket meant Kasuku could control how much she wanted to be in or out of the world.

They crossed the park and cycled down Lover's Lane towards Dollis Brook. At the bridge over the train tracks they stopped for a moment to watch the underground trains rattling back and forth to Mill Hill. They'd always done that, since Olly was a baby, and they still did it now even though he was far too old for the train driver to wave at him and blow the whistle. Along the banks of the brook the wild garlic was starting to sprout and a strong odour of garlic flavoured the air. Amongst the broad leaves of garlic, snowdrops drooped their delicate, pale petals. The lawns next to the playground were empty except for a huddle of teenagers poking at their mobile phones. Olly said:

'Kasuku wants to stretch her legs.'

They dismounted and Olly took Kasuku out of her basket and put her down on the lawn. She began a busy investigation of the blades of grass. Olly and Jack knelt next to her even though the ground was muddy and the wet seeped through their trousers.

'How was school?'

'Okay.'

A jogger and his dog came bobbing along the river path. Kasuku saw the dog and barked loudly. The dog paused and swung its head from side to side, sniffing the air in confusion. Olly and Jack laughed. A moment later Olly said:

'Something's the matter with the Bentleys.'

Jack raised his eyebrows.

'Emma Bentley's been crying all day. They let her stay in the sick room for a couple of hours.'

'Oh.'

'Christopher Bentley looked funny too.'

'Did he?'

'Why are they sad? She must have told you.'

Jack scratched the blonde bristles on his chin. He'd forgotten to shave that morning but he always scratched like that if something troubled him.

'They've had a disappointment,' he said eventually, 'They were supposed to go to America to see their father but he's made other plans with his girlfriend and he doesn't want them to come any more.'

Olly bent his head. Kasuku stopped worrying at the grass, hopped onto his knee and worked her way up to his shoulder. He let her tease his earlobe with her hard black beak. He thought of Tata in the early afternoon, glancing out of his office window as he worked, seeing the sun break apart the cloud cover. Tata hurrying back to Finchley on the tube to sign him out of Homework Club so they could enjoy the first warm day of the spring together. Sharing Tata's bed after a bad dream: the cocoon shaped by Tata's quiet, heavy breathing which allowed Olly's fears to ebb away. He tried to imagine how it would feel if he was separated from Tata and Tata

lived far away and they had plans to see each other but Tata decided that doing something else with somebody else was more important.

It was not a thing he could imagine because Tata would never, ever do that.

'Abby's been trying to find somewhere nice to take them as a consolation but it's just too late – everywhere is booked up.' Jack sighed. 'If we were going to be around I would have suggested a few day trips we could maybe try together. But I'm absolutely committed to going to Letaba. I have to finish my paper on the Pel's fishing owl before the Royal Society Conference in June and I can't do that without a couple more weeks of fieldwork.'

Kasuku made a funny low groan into Olly's ear – another parrotly way of showing love. He lifted her off his shoulder and onto his lap and rubbed her head. He closed his eyes then, aware of the small bird warmth of Kasuku on his lap, the big human warmth of Jack next to him.

Olly sensed muddled, contradictory pressures in Tata. Tata wanted something – wanted it badly. But Tata didn't know that he wanted the thing he wanted.

Olly squeezed his eyes more tightly shut. The shape of what Tata wanted formed in his mind. He opened his eyes again quickly.

What Tata wanted certainly wasn't what Olly wanted. In fact, it frightened him very much.

Jack sighed again. His long legs were getting cramped from kneeling. He lay on his back in his grey raincoat and stretched them out on the damp grass.

Olly cocked his head and looked at his father. A ripple spread out from the deep well of loneliness that Tata had always carried with him but that lately had seemed to shallow. The ripple widened and washed over Olly. Against his ear Kasuku lowered her wings, quivered and groaned again.

'They might be interested,' said Olly.

'Who? In what?'

'The Bentleys. They might be interested in the courtship displays of Pel's fishing owls.'

Jack sat up. From inside Tata's head, Olly felt the surprised startle of his father realizing what he wanted to happen.

'Do you mean that, Olly?' Jack gripped his hand, the one that wasn't stroking Kasuku's head 'Are you sure?'

Olly nodded once, and looked away.

## IN AFRICA

In the very front of the Renault eleven-seater minibus sat Jack, driving, with Abbey in the passenger seat beside him. The row behind them had bags on both seats, and the row behind that was full of luggage too, with Olly on the right-hand side, his cheek resting against the window. Emma and Christopher occupied the row at the very back of the van, and there was a free seat between them but even that had a suitcase on it. And there were more bags on the floor. Jack had arranged all the baggage at the car rental depot before they set off, strapping the cases carefully into place with the seat belts.

'Is it not possible just to shove them in the back?' Emma remarked sardonically as she watched Jack's too-skinny bottom reversing through the sliding door. It was the first thing she had said to him since the taxi arrived at 17 Paradise Crescent yesterday evening to collect them for Heathrow Airport.

Abby shot her a look. But Emma could see perfectly well a big luggage cavity in the back of the van.

'The supplies need to go in the back.' said Jack. 'There'll be loose tins. I don't want them flying around the interior of the van if we have to brake suddenly for an animal.'

Emma digested that whole, rather unexpected, sentence.

'Supplies? What do you mean? Aren't there shops there?'

Jack snapped a seat buckle into place around the pretty pink stars-and-hearts suitcase she had used to go to the hotel in France with her mother and father last year.

'There's one shop. But it's tourist curios mostly and a few bits and pieces of over-priced groceries.' He straightened up. 'We're staying at a lodge near Tzaneen tonight – that's a little town in the mountains about an hour from the park gates. We can get everything we need in the morning before we go through to Kruger.'

Emma had rolled her eyes but she climbed over her suitcase into the back of the van. Christopher settled himself opposite her. He'd watched three films back to back on the entertainment system in the aircraft and now his eyes were puffy and



shadowy underneath. The sun was warm on the car and he fell asleep quickly, even as they were pattering along the congested motorway that led out of the city of Johannesburg.

From the look of Olly's head against the window pane he was sleeping too. Although Emma didn't know if he had also stayed awake all night feasting on films like Christopher because Jack and Olly had been allocated seats on the other side of the plane.

Emma had watched the beginning of one movie but she just couldn't concentrate. She kept thinking about how wrong everything was and how Dad had cancelled their trip to America and what that meant. And then Mum had suggested this trip – not suggested even, just told – *we're going to join Jack Beyers on his research trip to the Kruger National Park in South Africa. It's an internationally acclaimed wildlife reserve. This is a wonderful opportunity for you both.* What! they'd cried, springing up from in front of the TV, but Mum's mouth was set – no negotiations. And there Emma was on a long-haul flight for the first time ever. Her stomach ached, and when a tray arrived with small transparent buckets of salad and chocolate pudding and a tin-foiled serving of lasagne, she just handed it over to Christopher. Even though she had the window seat already and didn't need to trade. She drooped further and further into her well of misery until the sadness washed up around her ears and she sank into sleep.

When she woke the sun was shining brightly and the other passengers were stretching their legs and queuing for the toilets. Emma stared down at the bare red earth of the world beneath the plane. It didn't even look as if human beings could survive there but she supposed there must be some because she could see thin lonely stripes snaking off to the horizon, which she guessed were roads. Eventually the red earth gave way to farmland and after a while the farmland started to sprout little toy houses and the winking blue squares of swimming pools. The pilot told everybody to go back to their seats as they were descending into Johannesburg.

By the time they had gone through the arrivals hall and collected their luggage and Jack had finished fussing with the rental van it was the early afternoon. It was kind of peaceful in the back of the car with Christopher sleeping next to her.

Mum had bought her a big bag of snacks in the airport because of missing all the meals in the plane and she curled up on her seat eating the snacks and watching the landscape fly past. Things weren't bare and red here but rather leafy and very green. At first they drove through what seemed an endless green plain but after a couple of hours the road seemed to dip in and out of hills, and wind between small mountains with rust-coloured cliff faces. There was a sprawling dusty town. She made out compact brick houses squatting in the dust, very un-English looking houses. Along the sides of the road black boys who looked younger than Christopher appeared to be in charge of groups of brown-and-white cows, trotting after them and flicking at their rumps with switches. Strange and disturbing trees began to stud the hillsides, although Emma had to admit that, in their own way, they were quite spectacular. One had a brown, frondsy trunk and the leaves formed a wild, spiky hairstyle. Another even more peculiar one, looked exactly like a huge swollen bright-green version of the candelabras her Jewish friends from school kept on their mantelpieces in their homes. Except candelabras were beautiful and this weird other-worldly plant was rather menacing.

Christopher stirred, opened his eyes, blinked, winced and shut his eyes again. Olly woke up properly and leaned forward. In his ridiculous growly voice he asked Emma's mum if he could have a juice from the carton next to him.

Abby twisted round in her seat.

'Just help yourself if you're thirsty, Olly. They're for everyone. You needn't ask.'

She smiled at him. Emma averted her eyes and went back to pressing her nose against the window. They were starting to motor up into real mountains now. Plantations of tall pines rose from the slopes. The light seem to dim a little to a softer shade of yellow, and a light mist wraithed the top of the pines. And then, without warning, everything went black. It was almost like some-one switching a light off.

Christopher sat up in his seat.

'Why is it dark already? What happened?'

Jack said: 'The sun sets very quickly here, Chris. It's sub-tropical.'

Emma considered explaining to Christopher what sub-tropical meant and why a sub-tropical sun should set more quickly than a not-subtropical sun. But she gave up on the idea, in part because she wasn't altogether sure but chiefly because Jack might think she was actually interested. A few minutes later Jack said: 'We're only about twenty minutes from the lodge now.'

They swung off the road into a smaller road, and then an even smaller road, and then an untarred road that wasn't much more than a track. Jack wound down his window.

'Smell that. Doesn't that smell good, kids? That's the smell of Africa at night.'

It did smell good actually, wonderfully good, as if some-one had taken all the herbs from Mum's kitchen herbal pots that had pleasant smells, the mint and the rosemary and the thyme and the lemon grass, given them smell super-powers and sprayed them into the night air.

But Emma was growing tired now, a drenching, overwhelming tiredness. In a haze she registered that they had stopped outside some gates and a big sign on stilts – MOTSUMI LODGE. Jack pressed a button and the gates rolled back. They drove up to a low building which looked like an office.

'Mr Beyers', Emma heard, 'How was your flight? Drive through okay? Look, I've got to go through to Joburg really early tomorrow but this is our night watchman, Lesedi – he can help you with anything you need. I've put you and your boy in Hippo Chalet, and your girlfriend and her kids are in Waterbuck Chalet.'

*Your girlfriend!* The tiredness receded enough for Emma to shoot an appalled look at Christopher. But he was blinking blearily at the lodge manager and Mum was already helping Emma out of her seat and through the chalet's stable door. Emma took in a round, cosy room and a big double bed flanked by two single beds, all covered by plump duvets with animal patterns on them. Mum put some toothpaste on a brush and Emma made one or two desultory swishes around the interior of her mouth. Then she let Mum help her into her pyjamas as if she was still a toddler but she made sure she kept her elbows stiff and resistant so that Mum had to tug sharply at the pyjama top to get Emma into it. *Your girlfriend!* It wasn't very

nice having to think of Jack as Mum's boyfriend but it was about a million trillion times worse to think of Mum as his girlfriend.

She slumped against the pillows in her single bed, watching Christopher and Mum make preparations for bed through hooded eyes.

There was a knock at the door. Mum opened it. Emma registered the glare of the overhead light bulb on a wide, brown forehead, creased with lines, and a milky cataract-blinded eye.

'A bottle of water for your fridge, Mizz Bentley. We're going to shut down the electricity generator when you turn your light out but there's a torch in the table drawer here if you want it. If you need me in the night, I'm in the guardhouse across from you. You can just call.'

'Thank you, Lesedi. I'm sure we'll be fine til the morning. Good night.' Mum closed the door after the night watchman. Emma watched her screw the cap off the bottle of water and then she loomed up next to Emma with some water in a glass in one hand and a small yellow pill in the other.

'You need to swallow this, Em. Kruger's a malaria-risk area. The pills will keep you safe if you get bitten by mosquitos.

Emma accepted the pill and the water silently. When Mum turned her back she drank the water but she poked the pill swiftly between the headboard and the mattress. She detested pills and medicine of any sort even when she was actually sick. And as for now, well none of this – absolutely none of it – had been her idea in the first place. It bewildered her that everything was just tumbling on and happening to her and she didn't have a proper say in anything and nobody in the world cared that she had stopped being happy and she wouldn't ever be happy again. The whole of life was incredibly unfair.

## ANOTHER DREAM

Olly snuggled into the centre of the bed, feeling the animal print duvet grow warm around him. His thoughts roamed backwards through the last twenty-four hours, skittering over the parts that were full of the Bentleys and focusing finally on his farewell to Kasuku. He had had to be a little stern with his neighbour, Bea Williams, but Bea Williams was known to be occasionally forgetful.

'You won't have to make her any vegetables at all. All her vegetable mash is prepared and frozen, one cube for every day we're away'. Bea Williams nodded dutifully, sliding the two ice-cube trays Olly had handed her into the freezer compartment of her refrigerator.

'Just defrost one each night and give it to her at room temperature in the morning.' He ran his finger along where that instruction was written in the schedule he had drawn up for Bea Williams. 'Everything else' he turned to Kasuku's feed box and prized off the plastic lid, 'her grains and nuts and seeds are in here, and I've put the right amount for each day into these baby weaning pots. So the only thing you'll need to buy fresh is the greens and fruit, but she likes variety. I wrote a list of the things she likes to eat here.' He showed her where he'd sticky-taped the list to the bottom of the lid. 'And either eggs or cheese for her dinner but she only needs a very small portion.'

Bea Williams said 'Got it, Olly.'

'I would have packed all the greens and fruit,' he added apologetically 'only they need to be fresh so you'll have to buy them.' He fetched a ten-pound note out of his pocket and pressed it into Bea's hand. 'You won't forget?'

'No Olly.'

'And she needs to be in her night cage by eight pm by the very latest.'

'Yes Olly.'

'And Bea – absolutely no smoking anywhere near Kasuku. Even when Mr Williams is out. If you have one on the balcony, you must remember to wash your hands before you cuddle her. You promise?'

'Shoosh,' said Bea Williams, glancing in the direction of the kitchen door and Mr Williams, who wasn't out right now. They were Catholics and Olly remembered she was supposed to have given up smoking for Lent. 'Buzz off now, Olly. I'll take good care of your bird, I promise. Haven't I always before? There's your father at the door.'

And indeed Jack was knocking at the door of the Williams' flat to announce that the taxi for Heathrow was waiting downstairs. Olly held Kasuku briefly against his chest before handing her over to Bea Williams.

She'd be fine, he thought now drowsily. Kasuku was very fond of Bea Williams. There was no doubt about that. He snuggled deeper into the accommodating softness of the mattress and the duvet pressed against him, warmer and warmer.

\*

*'Ndlovu? Do you see me?'*

*He does see but he doesn't understand. What he sees is the interior of a round hut, with a smooth, dung floor and red, white and black cloths pinned to the wall. There is an open doorway to the hut and beyond the doorway he sees rolling green hills, crested with huts and straying cattle and fat, spiky, thrusting plants. He recognizes the fat plants, which he has seen before on research trips with his father. They are called aloes. A path threads between the huts and the aloes, and in the distance he sees a young woman on the path, one hand balancing a tin bucket of water that rests on her headcloth. Close to Olly, inside the hut, is another woman and it is she who is speaking to him. This woman is elderly, black, plump, and seated cross-legged on a reed mat. She has a wrap of the same colours and patterns as the wall cloths fastened at one shoulder and, on her head, a heavy fringe of beadwork wound round a mass of woolly curls. There are beads around her wrists and her ankles too. On her feet she has thong sandals. She wears immensely thick bottom-of-a-jam-jar spectacles which make her brown eyes enormous, like an owl's eyes. She is smiling broadly so that Olly can see her teeth are worn down, one missing, although the remaining teeth are still very white.*

*He blinks back at her, confused.*

*'Where is Sanna?' Because Sanna is the one who comes in dreams.*

*She doesn't answer that though. Instead she says:*

*'My name is Nokhanyo.'*

*She waits as if she expects a response. He doesn't say anything.*

*'I can help you, Olly, but you need to trust me.'*

*'I don't need help,' he says stiffly 'I'll just go my own way.'*

*'Ee-eh-eh-eh- heh! Stubborn he is, like little Jacobus was too.'*

*But she seems more amused than cross. She stands up and goes over to a large trunk at the side of the hut. From the trunk, she collects two small plastic bags, both containing shards of a woody-looking substance, a kitchen knife, and a pestle and mortar. She returns to the reed mat, assumes a surprisingly agile crouching position for one so old, selects a fragment from one of the bags and begins to shave off slithers and drop them into the mortar .*

*'What are you doing?' asks Olly, despite himself.*

*Nokhanyo pauses. She waves one finger at the doorway and Olly understands she means the young woman he saw earlier. The woman has drawn closer to them. She places her bucket of water carefully down outside one of the nearby huts. Now that she doesn't need to keep her spine straight, she has become stoop-shouldered and hunched. Her eyes remain on the bucket.*

*'This woman was almost a mother. She had a baby in her womb but the baby was ill and he came early, before he could live. Every day for a year now, she has wept for her baby. She doesn't eat. She doesn't sleep. She is too sad.'*

*Nokhanyo's face has also grown sad in telling this. She gives herself a brisk shake, stands up again and crosses to the other side of the hut. She takes the lid off a plastic bucket and ladles a cupful of milk into a small tin saucepan that rests beside the bucket.*

*'Her baby doesn't want her to grieve any more. She doesn't know yet but he has come back to her and she needs to look after herself so that she can take care of him and help him grow. In a moment now she will come to see me and I will tell her these things.'*

*'But what's in the plastic bags? What will you do with them?'*

*'They are roots and medicines. I am making a preparation to give her strength. I have dried them already.'*

*'And the milk?'*

*'Once I have ground and mixed the roots, I will cook them in the milk as a drinking medicine. But I will do that in front of her. I will speak to the medicines, call for their power, and she will watch me. See, here she comes now.'*

*Olly glances back through the doorway. Nokhanyo is right. The young woman has turned and is making her way towards them.*

*Nokhanyo sits back on her heels. She reaches out and touches Olly's cheek, softly, the lightest brush, so he doesn't retreat. Her brown eyes behind her spectacles are huge, kind and grave.*

*'Don't you want to learn, Ndlovu?'*

*'No.' But then he says, eyeing the roots, the milk, the pestle and mortar. 'I don't know.'*

*'If you want to learn, you need first to speak to your father. Where you are now, the One of the Light is close and can help you. He is waiting to help you. You must ask the One of the Light to help you with your father.'*

*'My father won't like it,' blurts Olly instinctively. As he says that the shape of the old woman begins to blur, her plump outline becoming one with the mud walls of the hut.*

*'But this isn't a choice for little Jacobus, Ndlovu. This is a choice for you.'*

*'Jacobus?' Olly frowns, his eyes squinting at Nokhanyo, trying to settle her fading image. 'Who ...? Do you ...?' But at the same time as he begins to frame the words, fear snatches the question from his lips. The old woman stretches out her wrinkled hand towards him again but he scrambles backwards and slips, slips, slips while a sweet, smoky smell floods the air.*

\*

The creak of a door closing, key turning in the lock. Steps. Wan column of torchlight. Sigh of a mattress giving beneath the weight of a body. Rustle of drawn bedclothes.



'Mummy?' said Emma, sitting up in bed, a bit afraid in the moonless night in this dark, unfamiliar place that wouldn't have light until the morning.

'Shhh – it's okay. Olly's had a fit. He's all right now. He asked for some warm milk and Lesedi's gone to heat some in the kitchen.'

'It happens to him all the time,' said Emma. 'Jack should help him, not you.' She slid back down and pulled the duvet over her head.

'You could try and show a little more concern, Emma,' said Abby but Emma pretended not to hear.

\*

'Mum?'

'Shhh, Chris. Olly was ill in the night – everyone is still sleeping. Jack wants him to lie in a bit before we set off.'

'But I'm all awake now. And it's light.'

'Well go outside and have a look around for an hour. Just don't disturb the Beyers.'

Christopher stood on the doorstep of the chalet, blinking in the crisp morning light. A few yards away, down a cement path, was the small square brick building of the guardhouse. He could see the old night watchman with the blind eye, Lesedi, sitting on a chair. His back was to Christopher but Christopher caught the hissy merriment of a radio talk show host. In the opposite direction the cement path led up to the office where they had booked in last night. There were about half a dozen circular huts, just like the one they had stayed in, clustered around the walkway.

Directly across from Christopher was a big field, empty save for a stand of trees and a herd of goats. He picked up a collection of interesting stones from the gravel bed in front of his chalet and, pocketing them, decided to go and explore the field.

The goats weren't too happy with that decision. '*Bleh*' they complained '*bleh bleeh!*', looking askance at Christopher with suspicious yellow eyes. They skipped away smartly which encouraged Christopher to trot after them. He chased them clockwise round the field and then anti-clockwise, and then diagonally across the field. Then he decided as an experiment to see if he could divide them into two

groups, brown goats and white goats. But the goats disliked him so very thoroughly by this point that they refused to obey any orders at all. They clumped together in one big, defensive group and glared at Christopher.

He tired of the game and leaned against one of the trees, breathing heavily and fidgeting his stones in his pocket. He peered up into the branches of the tree. They were unusual these trees actually. They had a rough shape to their foliage, almost like a ball, and tapering leaves with raised, distinct veins. He couldn't remember seeing any trees like them in England.

'Hello, Christopher.'

It was the night watchman, Lesedi. Christopher hadn't heard him approach.

'Hey,' said Christopher, a bit shyly. Emma was generally in charge of conversations with strangers but she wasn't here right now. Was Lesedi going to tell him off for teasing the goats?

'This tree is interesting for you?'

'I was wondering – what sort of a tree is it?'

'This one is a mango tree.'

'Oh mango tree!' Christopher was familiar with mangos, which came in delicious dried strips in a resealable foil packet from the Exotic Fruit Delights company. He squinted up into the branches again. 'But where are the mangos? Can I have a mango?'

Lesedi laughed, his good eye twinkling.

'You might be able to if you hurry and you get your mother to take you to the shops. All our mangos are picked now. The mango season is finished.'

Christopher considered that. He'd never really thought about seasons for food, although of course you could only go raspberry picking in the summer and you played with conkers in autumn. But not about seasons for other things. The Bentleys shopped for groceries at Tesco's and Tesco's didn't have seasons.

Across the field, Jack emerged from Hippo Chalet. Lesedi and Christopher saw him come out at the same time. Did Christopher imagine it, or did Lesedi's single twinkly eye suddenly grow serious?

'Excuse me,' Lesedi said. He started walking towards Jack. Christopher jiggled his stone collection and watched him go.

Jack looked worn-out, Christopher could see, even from where he stood. Of course, he'd been up with Olly half the night. Lesedi drew close to Jack and Jack held out his hand to shake Lesedi's hand. They shook hands in a funny way – first like normal, and then a quick upward change of grip, and then like normal again. That had to be a special way of shaking hands in Africa, Christopher decided. He wondered if only men did it.

Lesedi and Jack had gone off a few yards from Hippo Chalet now and were talking. They were too far away to really follow what they said – especially Lesedi - his part of the conversation wasn't much more than a low rumble. But nevertheless it was a still, clear morning and the odd word drifted across. Whatever Lesedi was saying, Jack was nodding, his head inclined towards the night watchman.

'Special' Christopher heard, and Jack continued to nod. Rumble rumble and then clearly:

'Spirit-sick. Searching for a teacher.'

Jack stopped nodding. He stepped right up to Lesedi and grabbed his shirt front. For one appalling moment Christopher thought Jack was going to head butt the old man. But he only said something – hissed something – and let go of Lesedi none too gently so that the old man almost fell backwards. Jack turned on his heel and stalked back into Hippo Chalet.

Christopher didn't know what Lesedi had said to tick Jack off but he certainly didn't think it was very nice of Jack to suddenly go off on one about it like that. Lesedi should knock on Jack's door and demand an apology! The old man didn't however. He just stood outside the chalet for perhaps a minute, stroking his chin, and then he also turned and disappeared into the guardhouse.

## LETABA CAMP

The Renault van stopped in front of the Phalaborwa Gate entrance to the Kruger Park. The gate had three stone bases, topped with timber beams supporting a thatched roof. Another thatched building, clearly an office, stood just to the left of the gates.

Jack manouevered the van into a parking bay.

'I've got to go and pay the park fees,' he said over his shoulder. 'You want to come inside?'

'Yes,' said Abby.

'Okay,' said Olly.

'No' said Emma and Christopher. They sat together in silence once the others had gone. It had been a silent and uncomfortable sort of morning so far. They had silently watched Jack help Olly into the van, a bit shocked at Olly's hunched shoulders and shadowy eyes ('he doesn't look too good', Emma had to admit). Then they endured a silent drive through to an ugly town near the park gates, followed by more silent traipsing after the adults up and down the aisles of the ugly-town shopping centre whilst they both tried assiduously not to make eye contact with Olly.

Now Abby reappeared from the thatched-roof office, waving a slender green book with a picture of a lion on the front.

'Jack's almost finished. Look! I've bought you a Visitor's Guide to the park.' She was speaking in an urging, breathless *isn't-this-going-to-be-so-much-fun-you-two* voice. 'Look!' she repeated although they were looking, 'It's got a road map of each section of the park – this is us, page 11, we're situated about halfway up the park, you can see the route we'll follow to Letaba. And there are sections on common mammals, and antelope and birds, for species identification.' Hopeful brown eyes, backlit by an imploring smile, switched between Emma and Christopher, and finally settled on Christopher.

'Thanks Mum,' said Christopher. He held out his hand for the Visitor's Guide.

'I want my own one. Get me my own one.'

Abby lost the smile.

'Emma, I'm starting to get just a little bit tired of your attitude. You don't need your own one. You can share with Chris.'

'No I can't. I'll be trying to identify a species and Chris will be hogging the book the whole time. If I am supposed to be identifying species can I not at the very least have my own book to identify them with?'

Abby went back inside the office.

'Be nicer to her,' said Christopher. He wasn't any keener than Emma about what was going on but he didn't like to see his mother hurt. 'She seems a bit stressed.'

'*She's* stressed! Excuse me! What's she got to be stressed about? Whose fault is it that we're here?'

'One of these days,' said Christopher hopefully, 'you'll go too far and she'll whack you.'

'No she won't. She doesn't believe in using violence to discipline kids.'

They quarreled on a bit in this vein, both enjoying the bickering after the long silent morning. But presently Abbey, Jack and Olly returned so they went back to being mute. Abbey handed Emma another copy of the Visitor's Guide. Emma didn't say thanks. She held the book up in front of her face as the van passed through the park gates. She decided that from this moment forward for the next fortnight she would refuse to make any eye contact with Jack Beyers at all. She knew how to do it too. If he looked her way or tried to attract her attention in any fashion whatsoever she would simply hold the Visitor's Guide directly in front of her face, just as she was doing right now.

'Giraffe' said Jack Beyers 'Female.'

Emma dropped the Visitor's Guide.

'Where? Where?'

'Just there – behind that red bushwillow. You can see the neck and the head. Hold on – she's moving into the clearing.'

The great patchwork-patterned animal stepped gracefully into the open. They watched mesmerized as she took long, careful pulls at the browse. She watched them too, her dark, fringed eyes dipping towards the van every now and then. Eventually she took a final tug of leaves and melted back amongst the trees.

Emma had seen actual giraffes before, at London Zoo and at Whipsnade Zoo just outside London, and she had always found them beautiful animals. But she'd never experienced seeing one of them like this - not where the giraffe was in its real wild home, where it was meant to be and had been since the beginning of giraffes. This felt completely different. As if you were the giraffe's guest and she was granting you the privilege of observing a few moments in her world rather than being offered to you in your world. Emma wondered how Jack knew that the giraffe had been female. But she stopped herself from asking.

After the giraffe sighting, they were all glued to their windows to try and detect what else was out there. There were plenty of slender tan-coloured antelope with black lines on their bottoms - *impala*, said Jack, *you'll be seeing lots and lots and lots of those* - and Christopher thought he saw a rhino - *Rhino! Rhino!* - but when they stopped and reversed it was only a very large rock.

They had just passed a stone marker announcing it was five kilometers to Letaba when Olly whispered: 'Stop Tata.'

Jack pulled up. They all scanned the bush.

'You see something, Olly?' Jack enquired. After half a minute had passed he said gently, 'Perhaps just wind rustling the leaves.'

'No,' Olly faced left, staring across the road, chin lifted. 'There, in the mopane trees.'

They all squinted at the unremarkable stand of trees at which he was pointing.

'I can't see anything, Olly.' Jack said.

'There, there. THERE, Tata!'

And suddenly Emma caught sight of what he meant - huge grey stately shapes, advancing slowly through the thicket like great ships of the bush.

'Elephants!' she cried.

The gargantuan shapes, which hadn't even been there seconds ago, now loomed up all along the north-facing flank of the car. The lead elephant broke through the cover of mopane scrub. She swung round to face the van and flapped her great ears.

'That's the matriarch,' said Jack softly. 'She leads the herd and makes all the important decisions.'

The matriarch took a step towards them. She raised her enormous, wrinkled, grey trunk high above her head and held it there.

'There'll be a baby, or babies, with her. She's warning us to keep our distance.'

He slipped the van into reverse and as quietly as he could, backed up a few yards. And sure enough, out of the bush came an elephant calf, too small to have any tusks yet, with another adult just behind it. The calf caught sight of them and made a funny jaunty little side-step, almost like a dance-step. It stopped short in the middle of the road. Curious hazel-brown eyes focused on the van. The adult behind it gave them a much more cursory glance. Then she nudged the calf with her trunk.

But it was clearly a courageous little calf, and a calf with a lively interest in the world. It curled up its trunk, sucking the tip much as a human toddler might suck its thumb, and refused to move, giving Emma enough time to have a thorough look at it. It was the most comical, endearing little creature, in its baggy unlikely wrinkles and all its miniaturized elephantiness. Amazing to think one day it would grow up into a great king or queen of the bush, the largest land mammal on the planet. But for now it was very much a baby.

The adult elephant had had enough. She gave the baby a much more decided prod with her trunk. The calf obeyed this time and the pair resumed their soft plodding over the road and into the thicket. The rest of the herd followed – another adult, then a couple who, judging from their size, would probably have been about Emma and Christopher's age in elephant terms, and then more adults. Emma counted – eight, nine, ten in total.

When the last broad back lost its outline in the mopane foliage Jack started the engine up again.

'A family herd like that is all females and their young,' he said over his shoulder. 'The bulls leave the herd when they're about twelve, and live on their own or in bachelor groups.'

'It can be hard for them in the beginning,' chipped in Olly. 'Some really want to grow up and go but others miss their families. But it's nature's way of spreading the gene pool. The mothers have to force them out in the end.'

Emma glanced at the back of his head. He was so weird the way he would hardly say anything at all, but if you got him going on an animal he was interested in he could make practically a whole speech about it.

'I'll tell you another interesting thing,' continued Jack. 'An animal like a mouse, the brain size of a newborn isn't much different to the brain size of an adult. But a human newborn has a brain about a quarter of the size of an adult human brain. And a newborn elephant's brain is about a third of the size of an adult. As we grow up and learn our brains grow with us. Humans and elephants are both learning machines. We both have remarkable learning abilities.'

'You could see it in that baby elephant's eyes', interjected Emma eagerly. 'You could see him just thinking *What are they all about! What's going on! What are they going to do now. What what what what what?*'

'Emma's definitely a learning machine.' said Olly. 'She gets Amazing Achievement Certificates all the time.'

Well how about that! Who would have thought Olly even noticed how well she did at school, when he seemed so lost in his own little world all of the time. Emma swelled with pride.

'Not all the time,' she qualified. 'They didn't award them in Reception.'

'How short-sighted of them,' said Abby. Emma could tell from her voice she was still irritated about Emma's rudeness over the Visitor's Guide.

'But why shouldn't Reception kids get recognition if they're the best?' She could actually remember feeling cross about it all those years ago when she was a five-year old in the most junior class in the school. 'Teachers should try to encourage kids at the beginning of their education.'



'I suspect' said Abby drily, 'it has more to do with not discouraging the other twenty-nine children who don't end up getting the certificates.'

'Well that's not fair. Anyway some of them could get Excellent Effort ones. They could *all* get Excellent Effort except for the one who got Amazing Achievement! That would sort it.'

Jack laughed. But it wasn't a mocking laugh. In fact, it sounded very much like Emma's favourite type of laugh: the *wasn't-Emma-just-hilarious* variety. She recalled suddenly that he taught about birds at a university. Which meant he had a doctorate certificate- not a medical doctor certificate like Mum but the university learning kind. The one that you got when you knew everything there was to know about the thing you were an expert in, and could teach about it at a university. Jack must be a Doctor for knowing a lot about birds.

'Jack, have you got a doctorate of birds?'

'Uh huh.'

'So why don't you call yourself, Doctor Jack?'

'I do, at conferences and that sort of thing. But not in normal life. It's a bit poncey.'

'When I'm a Doctor of whatever I end up most interested in,' said Emma, 'I will most definitely call myself Doctor Emma all the time.'

'You'll end up being most interested in yourself though,' said Christopher nastily 'So you can look at yourself in the mirror and say 'Good morning, Dr Emma. Isn't it SPECTACULAR being Dr Emma today.'

'Spectacular' was rising fast to becoming Emma's favourite word, taking over from 'bewilder.' Emma heard Mum and Jack laughing in the front seats. Even Olly's appley cheeks looked puffed out, as if he was holding in a grin. She considered whether or not she should take offence but decided it was really quite funny. She joined in the laugh, wondering at the same time exactly how many years of study there were in between being in Year 4 and being a Doctor of the thing you were most interested in.

Oh my days! It wasn't even an hour since she had absolutely decided never ever to even look at Jack Beyers or pay him any attention whatsoever. And here she

was laughing, telling him her plans and asking him actual questions about his actual stupid life. She clamped her lips shut, slid down in her seat and held the Visitor's Guide up in front of her face.

They reached a four-way stop, crossed over it and came to a pair of stone columns, with a heavy timber gate swung back behind the columns. To the right of the gate, carved into a big slab of wood was the word LETABA. Either side of the gate ran a tall fence of thick mesh, topped with strands of electric wire.

Emma lowered the Visitor's Guide cautiously as they drove through the gates. The wild bush suddenly gave way to an orderly little village. Emma could see caravans and spreading trees in a small meadow and sweeping brick paths.

'I'll drive you around the camp quickly so you can get an idea of where things are before I book us in at the reception,' said Jack. He arced off to the right. They passed a petrol station and a shop. There was a gravel walkway and a low wooden fence. 'SWIMMING POOL' said a sign. Other signs announced: 'ABLUTIONS,' 'LAUNDRY', 'KITCHEN.'

Emma had never been anywhere like this before. It was completely different to the hotel they had stayed at in France last year, or any of the hotels or rented cottages or bed and breakfasts where she was used to going on holidays. She was actually going to live here for almost two weeks in this funny little bush village with wild, savage beasts just the other side of the fence. Despite everything, her stomach jumped with excitement at the thought.

Jack slowed down.

'There, to our right, those are the four-bed tents. Abby, you and Emma and Christopher will be in one of those. You're right next to the pool – that's the back fence of the pool over there.'

'Good,' said Christopher 'I love swimming.'

'Me too,' said Emma.

Abby smiled at them in the overhead mirror. Emma craned her head. The tents didn't look much like the normal tents you saw advertised in the travel section of the Sunday newspaper supplements. They were much bigger, raised on stilts and coloured a dark olive-green instead of being maroon or blue. She and Christopher

had never been camping before. Mum used to pester Dad to try it out but Dad always said he'd rather spend the night six foot underground than under canvas. That was a joke, of course, because six foot underground meant dead. Mum never laughed at the joke though because of not appreciating Dad's sense of humour.

Jack had slowed down again.

'Olly and I are staying to the left here, in the two-bed tents. But it's only a few minutes walk up the road. If you need us at all, it's easy to reach us.'

Having just thought of Dad, Emma remembered again that everything was bewildering and horrible. She looked over at Chris, opening her eyes super wide and giving a very sarcastic nod of her head. As if any of them would ever need Jack and Olly Beyers.

'There's a beautiful walk along the other boundary of the camp, with views over the Letaba river,' Jack continued. 'But you can explore yourself later. Let's go and get you settled in now.'

He turned the van around and drove back to the park entrance, pulling up at a parking bay in front of the reception office. They all climbed out of the van and trooped inside. There was a long wooden counter bisecting the reception, behind which two ladies stood. Jack went up to one of the ladies, opened his shoulder bag and pulled out some papers.

Emma saw a bench in the middle of the front section of the reception, which faced a wide screen television monitor suspended on the wall. The monitor was showing footage of an elephant herd, drinking and soaking themselves at the banks of a river. She sat down on the bench and watched the baby elephants splashing and jostling each other, whilst the mother elephants sucked up great jets of water with their trunks and showered the little ones. She wondered if it was the same herd they had seen earlier. Probably not because this herd was much bigger, with several babies.

'Mr Beyers!' Emma looked in the direction of the deep, friendly voice. A large man had emerged from a doorway behind the counter. He was fat but also muscular, with a round Father-Christmas style belly and blonde hair crowning a wide, slightly florid face. Emma guessed he must be a game ranger because he was

all in khaki: khaki shorts, a khaki shirt, khaki socks, a khaki belt with a walkie-talkie radio attached to it, and a broad khaki hat dangling from a string behind his back. His boots were olive-green but that was a game ranger type colour too.

The big man opened a flap to one side of the counter, squeezed through and crossed over to them.

‘I’m Ambrose Wilson, the field officer for assistance with research projects,’ He reached out a square, meaty fist to pump Jack’s hand. ‘Nice to meet you in person after all the emails. But I’ve been an admirer of yours for some time, Mr Beyers. Did I mention I read your work on lappet-faced vultures? Very influential – everyone had noticed the vulture chicks in the farming areas were hatching deformed but nobody had made the connection that it was because the farmers had exterminated the hyenas and there weren’t enough bone fragments around the veld for the adult birds to feed on.’ He released Jack’s hand. ‘But your carrion provision programme is catching on, eventually. Several of the farms surrounding the park are setting up feeding centres now. It’s just a matter of slowly persuading the farmers that they need the vultures to survive. Nature’s highly efficient waste managers. But come, come my office is just next door.’

He ushered them out of the reception, round the corner and through a doorway into a small office.

‘The weather’s nice and cool now, lucky for you.’

‘He thinks this is cool?’ thought Emma, who had been sweating a little since the plane touched down in Johannesburg. Ambrose Wilson caught her expression and guffawed.

‘Ja, you Brits on your frozen island. But believe me, you missed one helluva summer this side, I can tell you. Forty degrees plus every single day from December til a week or two ago, and very late rains. The poor elephants – you know with their thick hides they struggle to lose heat. They use their ears to cool themselves down – their ears are full of blood vessels, and as they flap them the blood cools down and circulates through the body. But some days this summer just gone, I swear, I thought our poor old tuskies were gonna flap those great big ears of theirs right off their heads.’

He shook his own head energetically.

‘But excuse me a moment – I’ll just get hold of the guys for you.’ He plucked his radio from his belt and spoke into it. ‘Phineas, Reckson – do you want to come over to my office? Mr Beyers and his group are here.’

*Mr Beyers and his group* wasn’t great, reflected Emma but it was stacks better than *your girlfriend and her kids*. While they waited she looked around the office – the shelves of files, a big wall-clock in the shape of an elephant’s head, and on the portion of the wall just behind her, a calendar. April’s picture was of an elephant scrambling down a nearly vertical ditch. She lifted the page and looked at May’s picture just to see and that was also of an elephant. In fact, every month was of an elephant. It was an elephant-themed calendar.

Ambrose Wilson was looking at her. Should she have asked permission before going through his calendar? Sometimes she got interested in things that belonged to other people, and she forgot about asking permission first before she examined them. He was smiling though so he obviously didn’t mind too much.

‘You must really love elephants, Mr Wilson.’

‘*Ag*, you know, I live for elephants. Never get tired of watching them. They’re the most amazing creatures on the planet.’ He nodded at the April picture of the elephant in the ditch. ‘You see that? They’re so big, so enormous but they are also really sure-footed. They can get themselves in and out of places you would never imagine accessible to something that size. They say an elephant can go places that a monkey holding a briefcase can’t.’

‘Why would a monkey hold a briefcase?’ asked Christopher.

Emma winced. She wished Christopher would *think* before he just came out with these things.

‘*Abusheni!*’ Two men had appeared in the doorway to the office. They were also clad from head to toe in khaki, with rifles slung on straps over their shoulders. The men eased the rifles off their shoulders, propped them against the wall and came into the room.

‘Hello Reckson, hello Phineas,’ Ambrose Wilson nodded and smiled, gesturing at the taller of the two newcomers ‘Jack Beyers, this is Reckson Nyonka.

Reckson, this is Jack Beyers. Reckson will be your field ranger down at the river while you are observing the owls.'

'And you kids,' he touched the smaller ranger lightly on his shoulder 'This is your guide, Phineas Ngala. Phineas, can I introduce you to Emma, Christopher and Oliver – just out from London, England.'

'Welcome, welcome,' said the ranger. The lines around his deepset brown eyes creased into distinct grooves, the kind of grooves you see on the faces of older people who have smiled easily and often all their lives. 'Welcome to our Kruger National Park, and to Letaba Camp.'

Emma looked questioningly at her mother. What was this?

'Oh Em, Chris – I completely forgot to mention. When Jack does fieldwork he always arranges for a ranger to accompany Olly. For bush expeditions or whatever interesting is going on so Olly doesn't have to sit about twiddling his thumbs while Jack collects data. I thought you two could join Olly this time.

Abby's voice was very casual, as if that was the sort of thing one did just forget to mention.

'Phineas was born in the park,' said Ambrose Wilson 'As was his father, and his grandfather, and probably his grandfather's grandfather. Nobody knows the park better.' He chortled and slapped Phineas affectionately between the shoulder blades. 'The gates only open at six now that the days are getting shorter so Phineas will come and collect you just before that.'

'Before six?' said Chris. He looked at his mother and whispered, although not quietly enough, 'What's he talking about? We'll be asleep at six.'

Ambrose Wilson hooted with laughter.

'No man! This is the bush! Nobody's asleep at six.'

Jack said: 'The animals and the birds are most active at dawn and at dusk, Chris. In the middle of the day when it's hot they rest and sleep. So we get up with them, and we have a rest when they do.'

Christopher couldn't believe what he was hearing. In Finchley, they left the house at seven forty five in order to be at Breakfast Club for eight. Mum always came and woke them around seven but Christopher never actually got out of his bed

until seven thirty, and a volley of warning calls from Mum downstairs. As far as he was concerned fifteen minutes was more than enough to use the bathroom and put on his school uniform.

He wasn't getting up in order to be ready to go and look at animals at six o'clock! He just wasn't a morning person. He never had been. And they were supposed to be on holiday!

Jack shook hands with Ambrose Wilson, and then Phineas and Reckson in turn. Abby and the children followed him out to the van. He drove them back to the tented area he had pointed out earlier and sidled the van alongside one of the safari tents, which had a little marker next to it declaring: 'No.10'.

Emma and Christopher clambered out of the van with their suitcases. It was hard to know exactly what to do with themselves so in the end, without speaking, they both decided to sit down on the edge of the veranda of the No 10 tent, leaning tightly against each other with their legs dangling over the side and their feet resting on the dirt beneath the stilts. They watched Jack and Abby cart the rest of the bags and the shopping from the van.

Jack rummaged in his shoulder bag and produced a key on a green plastic tag.

'Right ... well ... okay, Abby, kids. Olly and I can leave you to get settled, and we'll catch up with you tomorrow.'

Emma saw from their mother's agreeable nodding that the two of them had clearly thought up this plan earlier in the day. She had been feeling vaguely guilty about not offering to help more with carrying the provisions from the van but the feeling evaporated. She and Christopher wouldn't have chosen to spend the rest of the day with Jack and Olly, but how come it was suddenly Mum and Jack who got to decide everything that happened in Christopher and Emma's life, and Christopher and Emma were just supposed to good and do what they were told and not have any control over anything?

Jack turned to go, Olly at his heels. He glanced back and perhaps he recognized that Emma and Christopher felt a bit lost on the veranda of the strange tent, amidst all the bags and the shopping, with their treacherous mother who hatched plans without consulting them. Because he stopped and rubbed the side of

his nose with his long, slender forefinger and grinned, shuffling his tall frame from foot to foot.

'You know, Ambrose and Reckson are new to me but I have met Phineas before, when I was working on the vulture research down at the southern end of the park. You wouldn't remember Olly – that was six, seven years ago – you were still small. But Phineas was born for the bush. He loves it, and he knows Kruger inside out.' He reached down to Olly and gripped Olly's skinny shoulder reassuringly.

'You three will learn a tremendous amount from Phineas – you'll see. And he's a qualified walk guide so you'll be able to go out in the park on foot. It'll be fun. You guys will be three bundu bashers together in no time at all.'

Emma and Christopher surveyed him doubtfully. Olly's gaze was focused on the dirt.

'What's a bundu basher?' Emma's voice, if small, was very stiff and prim.

'What's ... oh,' Jack laughed, and adjusted himself on his feet again. 'That's just an old South African saying. The bundu is the bush ... the wilderness. If you go bundu bashing ... it just means heading off into the bundu, knocking about, seeing what there is to see.'

And with that he turned again, his hand still on Olly's shoulder, and Emma and Christopher listened to the sound of the van reversing and driving away.



## EXPLORING WITH PHINEAS

'Chris!'

Christopher felt himself being gently shaken.

'Chris,' said Mum again 'Wake up!'

Christopher swam groggily from a deep, deep sleep into the here and now. Yesterday afternoon, as it turned out against all the odds, had actually been quite a lot of fun. Once Emma and Christopher had digested that they were to be allowed a break from Jack and Olly Beyers, they relaxed. They dragged Mum over to the pool and dived in. The water was a bit cold at first because they didn't heat pools in Africa but it was brilliant to swim outside again after the long freeze of the British winter, and they splashed and shouted and did somersaulting tricks for over an hour. Then they towelled themselves dry and got back into their clothes. Mum said she wanted to organize the tent and they should go and explore the camp so they did. They walked through all the different areas: the bits for safari tents, and for cottages, and for camping with your own tents, and for little round huts like the ones they had stayed in last night at Motsumi Lodge. Emma saw from the photostatted camp map Mum had given her that in South Africa you called those little round huts *rondavels*. The rondavels formed a semi-circle around a big lawn in which tall beautiful trees grew. The trees were labelled with rectangular tin tags: *sycamore*, Emma read, *apple-leaf*, *leadwood*. The front of the lawn gave onto a bricked walkway, and as Jack had told them, you could see right out over the Letaba river from there. There were hippos in the river. Christopher and Emma sat on a bench and watched them. They didn't do very much, the hippos, just wallowing in the water with only their backs showing, and their bulbous reddish eyes, and absurd little ears. Now and then they yawned and sank lower in the water and birds came and sat on their backs.

Emma and Christopher went back to their tent. It was ship-shape now. Mum had folded all their clothes away in little open cupboards like bookcases, and tucked the suitcases under the bed, and stored their food in a refrigerator and larder

cupboard that stood just to the left of the tent's glass sliding door. Even the tent had some potential for exploration. They practised sealing and unsealing the canvas squares that blocked up the mesh windows, and experimented with the different settings of the overhead fan. The tent was supplied with electricity, luckily.

At supper time Mum announced she was going to make a barbecue.

'You!' said Christopher 'You don't know how.' They sometimes went for barbecues at other people's houses but they never barbecued at home.

'Oh but I do know how,' said Mum 'I was a Girl Guide when I was your age and after that I used to go camping sometimes you know, festivals and stuff, before I got married and had children. We didn't barbecue at home because your dad thought it made a mess and wasn't worth the trouble. But I do know how.'

And she didn't do a bad job either. The sausages were a bit on the crisp side. But, as Mum said, she hadn't cooked over an open fire in years and she had to get the knack back.

Falling asleep was quite fun too. From the other side of the fence came a whole range of grunts and barks and hoots and rustlings.

'I really do hope that's a very strong fence,' said Emma sleepily but Christopher was already out cold.

\*

'Chris, wake up now and go to the bathroom. Phineas is going to be here in a few minutes.'

Christopher stumbled out of the tent. It was all bluey-black outside but in the few minutes it took him to pee and splash water on his face the blue had already gone a lighter shade and was starting to vanquish the black. Birds were going beserk all over the place.

The Renault van was waiting at the tent. A rather battered looking green safari jeep was parked in front of it. The jeep had a green PVC tarpaulin stretched over its roof and rear, with a plastic window built into the rear, but the sides were open. Christopher could see Olly in the front of the jeep, sitting next to Phineas, and a dazed-looking Emma wrapped in a blanket at the back, her Visitor's Guide propped on her knees.

He climbed in next to Emma and wrapped himself in another blanket he found waiting on the seat. Mum handed him a tin mug of tea.

'Remember to bring the mug back afterwards. Have fun, my darlings.'

She kissed him and stepped smartly back from the jeep and into the van before he could raise any kind of protest. Christopher could see Jack Beyers at the wheel of the van, and Reckson with his rifle in one of the van's rear seats. He sighed. Yesterday afternoon had only one disappointing bit, which was when Mum explained that although they would be together all afternoon and evening, she intended spending the mornings with Jack Beyers, and Emma and Christopher would go off with Phineas.

'Why?'

'I really want to spend some time with Jack and learn more about what he does. You two wouldn't enjoy it anyway. We have to observe the owls on foot. It'll be hours and hours of either walking or sitting very still.' She fiddled with her hair, 'I'm very interested in all aspects of zoology, you know. When I went to university I had a difficult time choosing between studying medicine and studying biology.'

Emma and Christopher had exchanged glances. She was so obviously pretending, banging on about biology and zoology and university and spending time with Jack. What she wasn't saying was still really clear though: she was forcing *them* into spending time with Olly.

Phineas turned the key in the ignition. Emma twisted round in her seat.

'Mum! How are we supposed to get hold of you if we don't like it? We haven't got our phones!'

Abby let them keep mobile phones in England, for incoming and emergency calls. But their phones were still sitting on the kitchen island at 17 Paradise Crescent because she had been too stingy to pay for the international service. Possibly she didn't hear Emma because she made no reply. Emma subsided into a sulk. The engine roared into life and the jeep drove off, followed by the van, towards the gates. A dozen vehicles were already idling there. The whole camp was on the move. Two men came out of the reception and dragged the gates back and the vehicles started to feed through the gap one by one.

'Um ..Phineas?' said Emma, eyeing the open sides of the jeep. 'Won't the wild animals jump in and try to eat us.'

'Oh no no. They don't like to come in the vehicles.'

Well, she had to hope he was right about that. Because they had reached the front of the queue now and Phineas was stepping on the accelerator. Christopher turned briefly to look at his mother in the van behind.

Phineas drove the jeep back to the four-way stop they had passed yesterday. He chose the north-bound road. They passed numerous impala and then for a while nothing and then suddenly a big, swarming noisy troop of baboons. The big baboon dads hunkered in the road, and so did the baboon mothers with their little baby baboons hanging from their chests. Kid baboons scampered back and forth across the road, in their funny baboon fashion with their bottoms sticking up in the air. And the bottoms! – 'Have they *all* got cancer of the bottom?' asked Emma, but no, it seemed that baboon bottoms were meant to be that grotesque – hugely swollen and fuschia pink.

'The bigger the lady baboon is on the bottom,' said Phineas merrily, 'the more the man baboon wants her.'

'Yuck!' said Emma 'I'm glad we're not like that!'

Not long after, a most curious creature came lolloping up to the side of the jeep. It looked a bit like a dog that might have existed in cave-man times, with heavy hunching forequarters, prominent rounded ears, a black muzzle and dark-brown splotches scattered over its fawn-yellow fur. It came right up beside them and jumped up at the jeep, its great paws resting briefly against the jeep's side. Then it grinned, showing a long pink tongue and some very sharp teeth.

'Phineas!'

'That's a spotted hyena. Don't worry. They're just very curious. This one doesn't seem to be afraid of people.'

'Hyena!' Christopher exclaimed. He stared warily over the side of the truck. 'Like the baddies in the Lion King? That's the worst animal in Africa, isn't it?'

'They have a bad reputation but it's mostly unfair. They don't just scavenge – they are very good hunters themselves too. But people hate them because they've been known to take human children.'

'Really?' said Christopher, fascinated. He shrank back against the jeep seat cushion.

Phineas laughed. 'They wouldn't touch a big guy like you. They might be curious about you, but they wouldn't see you as food. You, on the other hand,' he turned to Olly next to him, 'You'd make a good lunch for a hyena.'

He veered onto a narrow track that led off into the mopane scrub and they bumped along for a while. Then he pulled up and said: 'Okay, young people, here we stop and get out.'

They all got out. Phineas reached inside the jeep for his rifle. As he came back round the side of the jeep Christopher noticed that he was walking with a pronounced limp.

'Have you got a splinter in your foot, Phineas?'

'Oh no no. A buffalo stuck his horn in my leg. Years and years ago. Since that time I've had a limp. See?' He pulled up the khaki leg of his ranger's uniform to show a long, raised scar running the length of his leg.

'Oh,' said Christopher.

Phineas caught his expression.

'Not to worry, Christopher. It was a long time ago. I was just a boy your age.'

'Oh,' said Christopher again, not reassured.

'Ah-hah!' Phineas put out his hand and pushed Christopher gently between the shoulder blades. 'I mean I was just a senseless boy herding my father's cattle, and I surprised a female buffalo with a calf and I tried to chase her away, and she tried to chase me away, and she chased very well, much more well than I! But now I have a big gun, and what is more and better, I have sense too!'

He laughed and they all laughed with him. He told them to stay behind him in single file, and then he set off, Olly just at his back, Emma behind Olly and Christopher bringing up the rear. Following Olly, Emma noticed that he had

strapped to his back a small worn khaki canvas rucksack with brown leather buckles and shoulder straps. She wondered what he kept in it.

‘These mopane trees,’ Phineas had stopped. He reached up and tugged a leaf from a tree, ‘You see the leaves are shaped with two halves, like a butterfly’s wings? Mopane means butterfly in Venda, one of the local languages. The elephants like to eat the bark from the mopane trees because it’s sweet, sweeter than other bark. But in the summer, big fat mopane caterpillars hatch in the trees. And those – we like to eat.’

‘Caterpillars!’ screeched Emma and Christopher.

‘They are delicious. We pick them out of the trees, and then we dry them in the sun, or smoke them, and fry them up with tomato and onion and spices, and they are an excellent snack. If they were on the trees all year, I would eat them every single day.’

‘Me too,’ growled Olly, in his lunatic gruff voice that didn’t fit with his girly body. ‘They’re scrummy.’

Emma and Christopher exchanged glances. Olly Beyers, on top of everything else, ate caterpillars!

Phineas patted the tree trunk. ‘Not a beautiful tree, the mopane, like the fever tree or the umbrella thorn tree but truly a fortunate tree for animals and people both.’

They walked on a bit, stopping beneath the branches of a much taller and more imposing tree.

‘Now this tree, this is a marula tree. In the summer the fruit comes on it and at the end of the summer when it starts to rot the elephant can come and bump it with his head and the fruit falls off and it’s a big treat for elephants. ‘And this here,’ stroking a pale-green shield of moss growing up the side of the tree ‘That’s lichen. You perhaps don’t see it in London because it likes a very clean, unpolluted environment. But lichen is a good friend for lost people. It grows only on the southern side of the tree so if you do get lost, you can always know which direction is which.’

Suddenly they heard a deep, throbbing grunt. Emma and Christopher jumped. Their heads whipped about and they pressed up against Phineas.

‘Phin-ne-yaaas? Was that ... was that?’

‘Yes, a lion. But don’t worry. It is nowhere near here. You can hear them as far as eight kilometres away. He’s just marking his territory. They don’t like to fight each other so they call out and that way they know to avoid each other. If they didn’t do that many more would die. Now that,’ he tilted his head in a listening attitude ‘that’s very nearby.’

‘*Chee-chakla*’, they heard, ‘*chee-chakla*’.

‘That’s a bird, a crested francolin. They call them the bush wake-up alarm. They only call early in the morning.’

Phineas led them on, showing them this and that, this animal footprint and that interesting plant, interspersing these pointings-out with stories of the different things he had seen and done in his lifetime in the bush. His voice was very lulling. At first Emma hadn’t been able to understand all of what he said because of the unfamiliar accent, but now she was starting to get used to the way he spoke. His words had a harmonious musical quality: speaking that thrummed just on the edge of singing.

In front of them rose a large reddish rock. They scaled it and Phineas reached into his backpack and produced cartons of apple juice, as well as some actual apples, and peanuts and raisins, and some crackers and slices of cheese. They ate hungrily. The francolins had stopped calling now and the sun felt hot on the back of Emma’s neck. She looked at her wristwatch. It was nine-thirty already. She never would have guessed.

They made their way back to the car and Phineas drove them to Letaba. He pulled up just outside the reception.

‘You okay to walk back to your tents?’

They said they were. Emma and Christopher set off quickly after the briefest of nods in Olly’s direction. The nods were meant to put him off in case he got any ideas about coming with them.

Olly sunk his hands in his pockets and watched them go, his head a little to one side. Then he ambled over the lawns and past a fishpond where turtles were sunning themselves on rocks. In front of the fishpond was a large outdoor screen and stone benches where they showed films about elephants at night. He had watched one of them last night with Tata. And behind the fishpond was a doorway with a sign above it saying 'Elephant Hall'. He went into the elephant hall and spent a long time examining all the things there: the wall paintings of foetal elephants and elephants at different stages of development, the jaw bone examples which showed how elephants grow six sets of teeth during their lifetime, and exhibits of the long, historic relationship between elephants and humans, stretching back to the taming of elephants in Mesopotamia four thousand five hundred years ago.

Eventually Olly came out of the hall and made his way to the river-view walk where he settled himself on a bench and extricated a book from his rucksack. Tata had given him the book last night. It was called simply *The Kruger National Park* but it had lots of interesting information in it.

He felt hungry. He looked at his watch. It was after twelve. Tata would be back from the owls by now.

Tata was back at the tent, sitting at the small table on the veranda with a beer in his hand. But he wasn't alone. Next to him, on one of the other chairs, was a big pink-faced man with lots of straggly blonde hair. His hair straggled all over his head, over his upper lip and down from his chin, in the form of a beard. He was also enjoying a beer. Olly saw that parked alongside the tent next to theirs, which had been empty yesterday, was a jeep.

'Ah, Olly,' said Tata. He got up, went to the fridge, poured a large glass of orange juice and passed it to Olly. 'Hubert, this is my boy, Olly. Olly, this is Hubert. He is a PhD student of ethnobotany from Ludwig- Maximilians University in Munich in Germany. Ethnobotany is the study of how people use plants for whatever they need – medicine, food, cosmetics, dying clothes and so on. It's a very interesting and important field of research. Hubert is travelling all over Southern Africa, collecting plant samples for a study on how rural communities have traditionally used natural



products to heal themselves. I was just telling him about my research on the Pel's fishing owl.'

'Ja, ahls!' said the big German heartily. 'Very fascinating birds, ahls. In Bavaria ve haf ze little pygmy ahl which is really not much bigger zan a budgie...'

He leaned back in his chair, stretching out his legs. Unusually he was wearing sandals with socks. Olly noticed that he had very peculiar socks too – dark green, bulky, bobbed and cable-knit into an alternating spiral and stripe pattern. Olly suspected that Hubert might have knitted his socks himself, but with no great skill as woollen ends poked out all over the place. He couldn't imagine any factory having the bravery to own up to them.

After an interval long enough to be polite, Olly made himself a ham and cheese sandwich, excused himself, and went to lie down on his bed, leaving Tata and his visitor to chat. After a while he heard his father say good-bye and then Tata came inside the tent too. He lay down on his stomach on his own bed and started to organize his owl notes from the morning whilst Olly read the next chapter of *The Kruger National Park*. Next door they could hear their neighbour huffing and puffing as he brought his suitcases in from his jeep. One of the suitcases made a faint tinkle as he set it down on the verandah. Olly supposed it must contain the glass sample bottles the German was using to house his specimen collection for his ethnobotanical study.

## A GREETING CEREMONY

The elephant matriarch dipped the tip of her trunk into the Letaba river. She sucked the river water up into her trunk, lifted her head up and back, placed her trunk in her mouth, and let the water flow back down her trunk and her throat while swallowing at the same time. The other adults and the calves used the same method, except for her own tiny calf. He knelt down and drank with his mouth.

When the elephants had satiated their thirst, they moved to a grassy slope bordering the river. They began to feed. The matriarch's little calf stood just beside her as she fed, swinging its trunk back and forth, and tossing it up and down. Occasionally it whirled its trunk in a circle. The baby elephant strayed a few yards away, and the matriarch stopped feeding and looked at the calf. A distinct rumble carried through the air to the opposite bank and the jeep full of watching humans.

'That's sounds like her stomach is upset', whispered Phineas to Emma, Christopher and Olly, 'but she's actually making that noise with her vocal chords. It is one of the ways they communicate - a kind of language for them. She's warning the baby to stay close.'

The calf hurried back to the matriarch's side but on the way it stepped on its own trunk and tripped. Back beside its mother, it gazed at her attentively as she broke off clumps of grass. She did this by twirling the grass with her trunk and then tugging sharply. After watching her carefully for a while, the little calf sought out a single grass blade and began to copy the matriarch's twirling motions. It twirled and twirled and twirled but in the end it did succeed in breaking off the strand, which it lifted triumphantly and promptly dropped.

'Oh no!' said Emma.

But the calf wasn't giving up. With vast determination it set about trying to pick up the single blade from the ground.

'Go on!' urged Emma.

It took about ten minutes but at last the calf had the blade of grass pincerred in the tip of its trunk. At that point it seemed to forget why it had wanted the grass in the first place. It deposited the blade on the top of its head.

Emma burst out laughing: 'After all that effort!'

Phineas laughed too. 'It doesn't need any vegetation yet. It's only about three months old. All its food needs are met by its mother's milk. But it needs to practice. It's a serious business for a baby elephant to learn to use its trunk. The trunk has forty thousand individual muscles.'

The herd finished feeding. They began to move off, making their way out of the river mud and up to the dustier reaches of the path that ran along the top of the bank. The quiet *sluff, sluff* of their feet kicked up the dust and their outlines became hazy.

Phineas glanced up at the sun, which was almost at the mid-point of the sky.

'All right, you three. Let's call it a day for today.' He started up the engine. The jeep was parked between a stand of apple-leaf trees at the river's edge where he had manoeuvred it earlier after they had caught a glimpse of the elephants making their way down to the river to drink.

Emma craned her head, for a final glimpse of the adorable little calf.

'Phineas, look!'

The matriarch had come to a standstill. She turned her head in the direction she had just come from and spread her ears. She was clearly listening. She gave a long, low rumble. She continued to listen and then she gave a much louder, throaty rumble. The rest of the herd began to do the same thing, rumbling and listening. The matriarch turned around fully and began to make her way back down the bank. The herd followed her.

Phineas cut the engine.

'I believe,' he said thoughtfully, 'you might be about to see something very special.'

'What?' the three children said at the same time.

'Wait. Just watch.' Phineas leant forward over the steering wheel, scrutinizing the far bank. Then he straightened up, and pointed. 'There.'

About two hundred yards upriver another elephant herd had appeared. The bank was much steeper there. The matriarch of the second herd lowered her front legs over the edge of the bank and knelt on her hind legs. She worked her way

carefully down the bank and into the shallows of the river. Behind her the rest of her family followed suit. One little calf at the rear of the procession balked at the edge of the bank, giving out a distressed-sounding rumble. Two of the adult females spun round, with their ears spread forward and their trunks out. They reached for him as he struggled over the lip, so that although he fell a yard or two their trunks broke the fall and he landed softly.

Suddenly there was pandemonium. Both matriarchs had their heads held high and their ears lifted. They began to run towards each other, plunging at full tilt along the river course. They rumbled, screamed and trumpeted as they ran. The two matriarchs came together. They tossed their heads, clicking their tusks loudly against each other's and entwining their trunks. Then they whirled around, flapping their ears wildly and leaning and rubbing against each other. All around them, the other elephants were doing the same thing, spinning and whirling, rubbing, flapping ears, entwining trunks and clicking tusks. Each herd consisted of about fifteen elephants and all thirty elephants seemed to be exceptionally pleased to see each other. The sound of their joyful rumbling and piercing trumpeting, even at the distance the jeep was from the herds, was almost deafening.

'What's going on?' said Christopher, awed.

'It's a greeting ceremony.' Phineas pointed at the first matriarch they had seen. 'You see that elephant? She's very easy to recognize because her tusks cross over a bit in the middle. We call her Matilda. And that elephant,' his finger moved to the second matriarch, 'that's Iona. If you look carefully you'll see that her one tusk is quite a lot shorter than her other tusk. Those two – Matilda and Iona - they're sisters. But they haven't seen each other through the whole of the dry season and they are very, very pleased to be together again.'

'I thought sister elephants stayed together,' said Olly 'and only the bulls left the herd.'

'No, not always. Because sometimes a herd gets too big, especially during the dry season when there isn't much good quality food available. Remember, elephants are very intelligent animals and they understand that they have to be flexible. Matilda was the matriarch of this herd – she's the older sister and the

oldest elephant is always the matriarch. But both Matilda and Iona had several daughters so the herd grew and grew. In the end, Iona had to break off and lead her own herd. But they remain very closely bonded. We call two families who come together like this when they can, a bond-group. The rains have been good for the last month and they will be able to stay together for a while now. You can see how happy they are about it.'

After about fifteen minutes the greeting ceremony began to subside. But the elephants were still in very high spirits, especially the calves. They chased each other along the river banks, making play trumpets with their trunks. Some of them waded into the mud wallows, flopped down on their sides and writhed and wriggled in the mud until their whole bodies were covered in mud, turning them from a light grey to a glistening black. The littlest calves climbed on top of the older ones, until there was a great heap of slipping, sliding youngsters in the mud-wallow. Others were play-fighting, pretending to attack, making brief, dancing lunges with their ears spread out, trumpeting, circling around, backing up and running off. Sometimes they attacked each other, and sometimes they fought stray logs that had washed up on the river bank. One elephant tore a small tree out of the slope of the bank and tossed it at another elephant.

A young bull elephant from Matilda's herd began to play-fight a young bull from Iona's herd. At first it was very playful. They stood head to head, pushing at each other, their trunks roaming about each other's faces, and in and out of each other's mouths. But then the Matilda-bull lunged, hitting his trunk hard against the Iona-bull's trunk. The Iona-bull lunged back, and their tusks hit with a resounding clunk. The fight was more earnest now. The Matilda-bull was taller but the Iona-bull looked heavier. They seemed pretty evenly matched. The young bulls pushed and shoved, backed off and rushed together.

Matilda's tiny baby, the one who had tried so very hard with the blade of grass earlier, had spotted a little white bird a few yards away. With its trunk flopping about in front of it like a rubber toy, it galloped after the bird. Unfortunately this bought the baby into a direct collision course with the sparring young bulls.

One of the bulls gave a particularly hard shove and the other bull stumbled back, missing the baby by inches.

Matilda looked over at her baby just as this happened. She gave a furious trumpet, lumbered over to the young bulls and swiftly broke up the fight by giving both of them very determined and painful-looking butts with her forehead. Then she let out a cross rumble that even the humans could tell signaled the end of playtime. She moved off up the bank again to the dusty patch at the top, sucked up some dust with her trunk tip, and blew the dust over her head and broad back. The other elephants did the same. When they were all lightly coated with dust, they walked slowly into the mopane scrub.

Phineas drove Emma, Christopher and Olly back to the camp. As they had done yesterday, Emma and Christopher set off for their tent, and Olly set off for his tent.

Emma glanced back at Olly. She thought of the Matilda elephant, and her obvious delight when she realized her sister was nearby. Olly was walking slowly, his hands in his pockets. What must it be like, to be the only child in a family? If it was her, she would find it very lonely. What was happening between Mum and Dad would have been a million times worse, if she had had to go through it alone. As exasperating as Christopher could be, she couldn't begin to imagine life without him.

'Olly?'

Olly looked up.

'Bye.'

He smiled, and ducked his head. Christopher looked at her sharply. Then he yelled '*Last one to the tent's a loser!*' and started running.

Emma ran after him.

## MEETING KHULU

'You *can* trap a mongoose in its burrow,' said Phineas 'and the meat from a mongoose is good to eat. But they are not easy to trap. The scorpion trap works the best, and scorpions you can find everywhere and anywhere. Look – here he comes now.'

The scorpion had ventured out of its hole. It wavered at the entrance, scuttled forward and dropped neatly into the empty soda can Phineas had buried there twenty minutes ago. At the bottom of the can, the scorpion threw itself about in agitation, unable to scale the sheer sides. Its venomous tail curled up. But Phineas reached for the thin, sharp stick he had prepared earlier. With a deft flick of his wrist he speared the scorpion neatly through its carapace. He lifted it out of the can, cut off the tail with his bush knife and threw the tail away into the sand.

'One scorpion, ready to roast.'

'I would *never* eat that' exclaimed Emma.

'You would, in a survival situation. They aren't too bad, with some salt. A bit gritty maybe.'

Emma, Christopher and Olly were out in the morning with Phineas again. He was talking them through possible survival strategies – how to make it home alive if ever you found yourself stranded in the bush.

'In most survival situations' he said now, 'you aren't going to be too worried about food. Remember, you should always have notified someone reliable about where you are going and what time you expect to be back. If you don't come back when you said you would, that person will send out a search party. A human being can survive only a few days without water, but weeks without eating. What you will be worried about, out here, is something getting ideas about eating you. So again, the three golden rules for an unplanned night in the bush.'

'*Find a high area! Stay away from animal paths! Make a fire!*' they chorused. Phineas had talked them through the three golden rules earlier in the morning. He clapped his hands.

‘Good students! Now who is hungry?’

And he didn’t mean for scorpions, thank goodness. He had packed oranges, and biscuits and the leathery rolls of dried, pressed guava fruit that Emma and Christopher had learnt by now were a South African speciality. He led them up a great boulder that was just the sort of rock you would need for Rule No.1 – *find a high area* – and laid the picnic out on a red and white square of checked cloth. They all tucked in.

‘There’s something out there,’ said Phineas thoughtfully.

‘Really?’ Emma scanned the mopane tree tops. They were perfectly still. ‘I can’t see anything.’

‘Yes, but you see those birds flying over the trees over there? Those are oxpeckers. They sit on the backs of most large mammals, although not elephants, and they feed on the ticks. It’s a giving-and-giving-back relationship because the ticks are pests for the animals. But also if the birds see something unusual they will fly up and make their alarm call. They’ve seen us now and they are letting the animal know.’

*Trik-quiss. Trik-quiss.* One of the protesting oxpeckers landed on an upper tree branch. Emma lifted up the pair of binoculars Mum had given her as a gift for coming on this trip. The oxpecker was a small bird with a red bill and bright yellow eyerings. And sure enough, a couple of minutes later they made out the shape of a large rhino beneath the mopanes.

Phineas made them wait up on the rock for a long time, until he was certain the rhino had moved off. Eventually he beckoned to them to stand up and they started to descend. Just at that moment a large bird of prey soared over their heads. Its wings were outstretched and, against the cloudless blue sky, they could make out in clear detail the pale-grey of its underwings, with their distinct black and white banding.

‘That’s a harrier hawk,’ said Phineas.

‘Look at it,’ marveled Emma, craning upward. ‘Isn’t it magnificent!’

‘Not if you’re a tree squirrel. Harrier hawks can climb very well, and they are also double-jointed. So they can get where they need to be and hang on to the tree



with their feet and their wings flapping for balance. Then they poke their bill into the nest hole and find what's inside and gobble it all up.'

'I've seen them do it!' broke in Olly. 'A couple of years ago, I was in Kenya with my father. We were staying at a camp on a river, and all these weaver birds had built their nests in the willow trees. The chicks hatched while we were there. We kept seeing the weavers flying back and forth, feeding the chicks. And then one afternoon, when Tata and I were sitting under the trees watching them, a harrier hawk landed on one of the trees and started poking in the nest and pulling out the weaver chicks. The parents were going crazy, but there was nothing they could do. I wanted to chase the hawk off but Tata wouldn't let me. He said the harrier had a right to eat too and the same thing had to happen if I was there, as if I wasn't there.'

They set off again. They hadn't gone very far when Phineas halted.

'Now this is very interesting. This tells you very much about the creature who made it.'

*This* was a huge, steaming, moist pile of poop. Emma suppressed a giggle.

'No, I'm serious. First of all, which animal makes a dung like this?'

'Elephant.' said Christopher.

'Good. And would you say this is old dung or new dung?'

'New dung,' said Christopher 'cos it's still wet.' Phineas had shown them elephant dung of various vintages yesterday.

'Correct. This dung, I would say, is no more than half-an-hour old at most. But – how old was the elephant that made this dung? Who can tell?'

Well, that stumped them. You could tell the age of an elephant from its *poop*?

'Look closely'. Phineas knelt down so they all knelt beside him. He stirred a stick in the poop.

'You see this? These pieces of leaves are almost whole. The elephant that chewed these leaves had very worn-down teeth.'

'Yes,' said Olly, remembering the jaw bone examples in the Elephant Hall at Letaba. 'They grow six sets of teeth in their lifetimes and when the very last pair wears down, they eventually die of malnutrition. An *old* elephant must have made this dung.'

Phineas nodded, sitting back on his heels. 'That's right. Where we are now' he waved his arm, 'this is typical old elephant territory. The river marshes are just over there. When their teeth wear down, it's easier for them to eat the soft marsh plants. And also they can't cool themselves with their ears as effectively any more so they need to be near the water.' He picked one of the leaf fragments out of the dung and peered at it. 'Do you know, young people, I think I even have an idea whose pile of dung this ...'

A branch cracked sharply above their heads. They looked up and there, poking through the butterfly-shaped leaves of the mopane, perhaps five metres from where they stood, hovered two immensely long curved tusks with an equally gigantic elephant head between them.

Emma and Christopher froze. Phineas straightened up slowly.

'Good morning, *Khulu!* Good morning old man, wonderful old one of the bush, old *ndlovu.*' He had slowed his musical voice right down, and softened his tone so that the words came out as if he was singing a hymn.

'Good morning to you, Khulu. These are my friends, Christopher' – he swept his hand gently at Christopher – 'and Emma, and Oliver', gesturing toward them too. 'They are here from London in England, learning about the bush. Thank you for visiting us here this morning, Khulu, old *ndlovu.* Children, stand now.' He didn't alter his tone at all as he said this, nor shift his eyes from the elephant 'Stand now – very slooowly – and step backwards, very slowly.'

They stood, their eyes locked on the great tusked head above them, and edged back.

'We must be leaving now, Khulu, old *ndlovu.* It was very good to visit with you here in your home. Goodbye now, Khulu. Children, turn slowly and walk ahead of me steady-steady-steady. Walk. Now.'

They started to walk. Behind them the huge elephant extended his trunk, tasting the scents in the air. Then he pushed clear through the violently shaking mopane leaves and came into the clearing. He stood for a moment with his head raised and his huge ears lifted and spread. Then he rumbled loudly and throatily,

tucked his chin towards his chest and flapped his ears. Draping his trunk over his left tusk, he started to lope towards Phineas and the children.

'Stop,' said Phineas.

*Stop?* But, in the absence of any other advice, Emma stopped. A gargantuan shadow fell across them.

'Khulu, old man, old friend, old ndlovu' sang Phineas, 'You are saying hello. We too are saying hello. You are greeting us and we are greeting you.' But Emma saw his hand drop to the rifle at his side and heard a tiny click as he slid the safety catch off. She swallowed hard, her heart thundering in her chest as six tons of solid elephant muscle towered over her.

The elephant stopped squarely in front of them. Emma could smell him now – a musty, grassy, slightly peanuttty odour, strong but not unpleasant. He reached out his great, long trunk unhurriedly and held it for some moments aloft. Then he brushed the tip of his trunk over the tight curls of Olly's head. He brought the tip to his mouth and sucked it. Then he reached out again, resting his trunk against Olly's chest.

Phineas had started to raise his rifle as Khulu reached out for Olly but he dropped it again, his eyes huge. Olly staggered a little as he took the weight of the trunk. The dark eyes of elephant and boy met. Khulu had noticed the stagger, and Emma watched his trunk muscles ripple as he lightened his touch. A deep, deep rumble sounded. The longest time seemed to pass in that strange tableau beneath the mopane trees: an elephant, a boy, and an astounded audience of three.

Olly lifted his small bony hand up to Khulu's trunk. He stroked the trunk, just once. The colossal beast was so very, very close that Emma could actually see the bristly hair fibres on the trunk flatten as Olly's hand brushed over them. Tears had collected in Olly's eyes. They welled and made shiny tracks down the pale-brown skin of his cheeks.

'I see you, Khulu,' said Oliver Beyers.

Khulu dropped his trunk. He rumbled again, swung around and started to amble away. At the tree fringe, he looked back over his shoulder at Olly. And then he was gone.

'I have never,' breathed Phineas '*never* seen that happen before.'

There was a big, wet patch of trunk slime on Olly's shirt. He looked down at it silently. Then he shook his shoulders out, raised his chin and wiped the palm of his hand roughly across both cheeks.

\*

'Everyone okay?'

They nodded. They had chocolate in their mouths. Phineas had found some in the glove compartment of the jeep and handed it out.

'I wasn't *very* worried when he approached us. Of course, it's not good to surprise an elephant in the bush, especially a bull elephant. But when I saw that it was Khulu, then I wasn't too worried. He's built like a prize-fighter, that one, but he doesn't have the aggression to match. For a big bull elephant, he is as gentle as a lamb. Did you notice the way he draped his trunk over his left tusk as he approached us? We call that the 'don't worry' walk. It's a bull elephant's way of showing he means no harm.'

'How were you sure it was him?,' said Emma shakily.

'He's unmistakable, Khulu. First of all, he's the biggest elephant we see in this part of the park because he's the oldest. Elephants grow throughout their whole lifetime so the bigger an elephant is, the older he is. Also, if you look at his right tusk, you'll see there is a deep groove near the tip. That's unusual. Another way we can tell elephants apart is their ear patterns. The outer edges are hardly ever smooth – they very quickly gets all sorts of holes and tears and bits missing. If you look at Khulu's left ear, you'll see he has two big very neat V-shaped notches in it, exactly as if some-one had cut them there with a pair of scissors.'

'I was *crapping* myself,' said Christopher which was a thing he wasn't supposed to say, although forgivable under the circumstances. 'I'm still shaking even now!' He was too. Emma could see his hands trembling. 'He was so blinkin' enormous! I just kept looking at him and thinking this *big, big, big* thing is going to smash us to bits.'

'No, Khulu would never trample you. If you were an elephant in this bush, Christopher, a boy-child the age you are, very soon that big man Khulu would be the whole world to you.'

'Hey?'

'He is the grandfather elephant. His name, Khulu – it means grandfather in Zulu. You know the young male elephants have to leave the herd at puberty? It can be a lonely time for them. It's really important that they find an adult bull elephant to teach them - about where the watering holes are, the best branches and berries, but also how to be a bull. Remember the herds are matriarchal so they have never had a father. To learn what life is for a bull elephant, they need a father figure.'

He peeled back the foil from the last of the chocolate, divided it into four portions and passed their share over to them.

'Khulu is the wisest, kindest old father bull we've ever seen. He must be about fifty-five now. They bought him from a hunting reserve forty years ago – I remember it very well because I had just started my first job in the park. He came together with his younger brother. Khulu and his brother were the children of the matriarch. Both of them hadn't left their birth herd yet although Khulu would have been about fifteen – on the late side to go independent for an elephant. I think he's always been a bit of a softie. Perhaps he stayed on so he could go independent together with his brother. His brother would have been about eleven.'

Phineas put his square of chocolate in his mouth.

'Of course, Khulu wasn't called Khulu when he first came to the Kruger park – that came later. On the hunting reserve where he was born, a trophy hunter selected his mother, the matriarch, for his prize. He shot her in front of the whole herd including the two brothers. At that time there had been a lot of poaching here in Kruger, especially of our older bulls, and we needed bulls for breeding so we offered to buy them. But there was trouble later. Elephants are just like people – some seem to survive trauma and are okay, and others just never cope. Khulu settled down in the park very quickly but his little brother was scarred for life. He grew up to be angry and dangerous. He started being much too familiar with tourist

vehicles and one day he actually pushed one over. It was obvious sooner or later a tourist was going to get killed. So they tracked him and shot him.'

'There was a young scientist here at the time who was studying jawbone development and asked for the jawbone. He had set up a little research camp near the staff village at Letaba, which isn't surrounded by gates. When they gave him the jawbone it was still a bit smelly and he put it out in the sun on the grass at the edge of the camp to dry out. One morning he woke up in his tent and he got the fright of his life. Khulu was right inside the camp. There were several other jawbones out on the grass but Khulu was feeling and stroking that particular jawbone, and turning it with his foot and trunk. The scientist was certain that Khulu recognized it as his brother's.'

Phineas sighed. He reached down and turned the key in the ignition. 'We think it was all the death and killing he experienced himself as a youngster that has made him so compassionate. It is unusual to see him alone. Usually he'd have a couple of wet-behind-the-ears young bulls trailing him.' Half-turning, he smiled over his shoulder at Olly. 'It looks like he thought you needed some looking after, Olly. Did you hear him rumbling and rumbling? Do you know, a lot of their rumbles human beings can't even hear because they are at such a low frequency. But they travel for a long, long distance. An elephant ten kilometers away can detect them through his ears and his feet and understand what they mean. It's like being able to make an elephant telephone call. You can't do something to elephants in one part of the park and suppose elephants in another part of the park won't know anything about it. By the time you get to them, they're several steps ahead of you.'

Emma chewed this over as they bumped along the rough track. The more she learned about elephants, the more astounded she felt that these incredible and spectacular beings existed alongside them on the planet. She mulled over Khulu, all the terrible tragedy of his young life, and the way he now took care of other bewildered young bulls. An image of her own father flashed in her head. Was he feeling happy in Argentina with Chelsea and the Manx Cats? Was he even thinking about her and Christopher at all? She pushed the thought away.

'Phineas?'

'Yes, Olly?'

Olly was sitting in the seat in front of Emma, his face in profile to her. She noticed suddenly that his pale-brown features had gone very pale.

'What did you call the elephant?'

'Khulu?'

'No, the other word you kept saying that wasn't in English.'

'Ndlovu?'

'Yes.'

'Ndlovu just means elephant, in several African languages. In Zulu and Xhosa and Ndebele.'

'Oh,' said Olly. He turned so that Emma could no longer see his face, and rested his elbow on the jeep side and his chin on his elbow, staring out at the bush.

They drove out of the mopane scrub and on to the tar road, and picked up speed, the jeep racing along at the full fifty kilometers an hour that park regulations allowed so that the wind streamed past and sang in Emma's ears. Emma leant her head against her shoulder, watching the back of Olly's head. In her mind, she replayed how Khulu had reached out with his trunk to Olly and touched Olly on his skinny chest.

Perhaps it was the rush of wind in her eyes but she suddenly blinked back tears. She thought of school, of Asif and Murray in the playground picking on Olly. *Barking Beyers! Barking Beyers!* Christopher and her had never called Olly by that name. But they had never tried to stop anyone else doing it either.

And then she was sobbing. She let all the tears that wanted to come out, come. Then she found a tissue in her pocket, blew her nose and composed herself. She shifted to look at Christopher, who was sitting in the back row alongside her, gazing out at the landscape.

'Chris?'

He half-turned, lifting his eyebrows.

'I'm going to be nice from now on. I'm going to be much nicer.'

'To who?'

'To him,' she mouthed, nodding towards the seat in front of them.

Confusion registered on Christopher's face, swiftly followed by anger. The anger contorted his handsome, even, sun-pinkened features into a deep scowl.

'What the heck, Emma?' he muttered 'Whose side are you actually on?'



## A DEAD RHINO

'*Tivoneli*, Christopher!' yelled Phineas. 'That one is the accelerator, not the brake.'

It was almost ten o'clock. They had had an eventful morning so far, having seen a herd of zebras, two wildebeest, one hippo, one waterbuck, one nyala ram, a herd of buffalo and about a hundred thousand impala. As they returned to the jeep, Christopher had asked Phineas hopefully if he could have a go at driving since they were so far from any other cars.

'Please please, Phineas. My mum never lets me.'

They may have been far from cars but they were not at all far from trees and rocks, as they were fast finding out. Christopher had already added three new dents to all the other dents the elderly jeep already boasted. Every time he banged into something Phineas howled: '*Tivoneli!*' Emma had worked out it must mean something along the lines of '*Watch out!*' in Tsonga, Phineas's first language. Or possibly, '*You're an idiot, Christopher!*'

'*Tivoneli!* Tree tree *tree!* BRAKE!'

'Olly?'

Olly turned to look at Emma. They were both in the very last row of seats, where they had scrambled for safety when Christopher hit his first tree. Emma glanced at Christopher, but his whole concentration was focused on his driving lesson.

'What do you keep in there?' She gestured with her chin towards Olly's canvas rucksack which lay on the seat between them.

'It's a survival pack. My father makes me carry it whenever I'm out in the bush. It's just got some things in it that I would need if I got lost.'

'Can I see?' she said, intrigued.

Olly unbuckled his rucksack and started to take objects out of it, and arrange them on the seat. As he did so, he explained to Emma what each item was. Some of them were unfamiliar to her, so he had to explain what they were for as well.

## WHAT OLLY KEEPS IN HIS SURVIVAL PACK

1. Waterproof matches
2. A candle
3. Iodine tablets, for disinfecting water
4. A flash-light
5. A Leatherman folding toolset (for all kinds of jobs).
6. A compass (for finding your way)
7. A thin, silvery blanket called a space blanket (to keep you warm)
8. A fleece –  
    ‘But it’s *baking!*’ whispered Emma  
    ‘But you never know,’ whispered Olly back. ‘It’s better to be prepared.’ –
9. A whistle (for attracting attention)
10. A mirror (also for attracting attention)
11. A small plastic cylinder of table salt
12. A roll of boiled sweets
13. Flares
14. A rain poncho
15. A small ball of string.
16. A water bottle
17. An enamel mug
18. A green box the size of a large pencil case with a white cross on the front. It was a First Aid box. When Emma went through it she found it contained: sterile gauze, adhesive tape, bandages in different sizes, antiseptic wipes, antibiotic cream, scissors, tweezers, calamine lotion, and paracetamol.
19. A small laminated card announcing:  
    **My name is Oliver Beyers.**  
    **I am ten years old.**  
    **I suffer tonic-clonic seizures (epilepsy).**  
    **Please call my father on 0044 82 413 3019.**  
    and finally -
20. A odd-looking small blue tube –

'What's that?'

'A bivvy bag. If you roll it out, it's like a small, thin sleeping bag that just fits round your body. Well, a grown-up's body so it's quite big for me. But it's waterproof, and warm, and it only weighs three hundred and forty grams.'

'Wow!'

Emma picked up the bivvy bag and bounced it in her hand. She couldn't believe that all of this stuff fitted so easily into the small rucksack.

'Have you ever *been* lost though?'

'No, not really. Once a guide got us lost on a guided walk but we found the track again before nightfall. We didn't end up having to use anything in the pack.'

Just then Christopher changed abruptly from third gear to first gear. The jeep shuddered, bucked and screeched. The bivvy bag jumped out of Emma's hand and rolled under the seat. Olly and Emma both dived to pick it up and as they did so, they bumped heads, rather hard.

Olly backed away. She saw uncertainty flash in his eyes.

'Oops!' said Emma. She rubbed her forehead, wrinkled up her nose and grinned at him. 'You okay?'

'TIVONELI!'

This tivoneli sounded more urgent than the previous tivonelis. Emma and Olly looked up. A massive elephant had appeared from the mopane thickets and was rapidly making his way towards them. Emma could clearly distinguish a dent in the elephant's right tusk and two V-shaped parallel notches in his left ear. It had to be Khulu! Phineas reached over and pulled up the handbrake, stalling the jeep. He swapped places with Christopher. Olly swept all his survival stuff back into his survival pack.

Khulu came right up to the jeep. He stopped in front of them, his eyes searching until he found Olly. He reached out swiftly with his trunk and Olly felt the sandpapery touch of Khulu's hide on his arm.

Olly stared at the great, grandfather elephant. Khulu's tail was held high and his ears were tilted up and back. Olly's mind was buzzing, full of a feeling of elation that pretty, talented Emma Bentley had expressed interest in his survival pack and

had talked to him. But he let his own feelings subside, trying to find instead a still place where he might feel what this huge animal in front of him needed. Because it was clear Khulu did need something. His trunk on Olly's arm was insistent, even, Olly sensed, agitated. For whatever reason, something was bothering Khulu and he was choosing Olly to listen to him.

Olly felt urgency. A command. Just then Khulu stepped back from the jeep, dropping his trunk. He turned and plodded back towards the thickets.

'He wants us to follow him.'

Phineas looked at Olly oddly. But, nevertheless, he started the jeep up again and described a wide three point turn so that the bonnet now faced where Khulu was walking away. Khulu looked back over his shoulder. *Frustration*, Olly sensed. Khulu turned, walked back up to the jeep and butted it with his broad forehead, adding another dent.

'On foot,' said Olly. He hoisted his survival pack onto his shoulders.

'Olly, I don't think' started Phineas but Olly had already vaulted over the side of the jeep.

'Olly!'

Khulu plunged into the thicket, with Olly following. He could hear Phineas yelling but he let the yells drift away and he focused on trying to share Khulu's thoughts.

Yesterday, when he saw Khulu's trunk reach out for him, a terrible fear stormed his body. But as the tip of the trunk brushed his head, the fear drained from him. A profound sense of peace stole over him. It was a peace which spoke to Olly of being in the world: of himself and Khulu; of all mankind and all elephantkind; of all things that live and breathe, plants, animals and man; and of a vast, limitless love in which all things exist. Olly felt a great power of love surge up through the grass at his feet, the wind-stirred mopane trees and the blue, blue African sky over his head. He stared into Khulu's dark, wise eyes and he understood that Khulu was asking him to understand. And that was why he had cried, there in the clearing yesterday, but again off and on in the night, as his father slept beside him.

But there was no peace in Khulu now. Hurrying along behind him, Olly's heart hammered with Khulu's urgency and his mouth dried with Khulu's anxiety. And – he felt a taut strain creep into his neck as he tried to absorb the emotion – anger. A hot, refusing anger. Olly shrank back and let a few yards open up between himself and Khulu. After all, he hardly knew Khulu at all and Khulu was a gigantic, wild elephant.

Olly heard footsteps behind him, the crunch of boots on soil, and the lighter patter of trainers. Phineas and Emma and Christopher had followed him and were not far behind. Khulu swept between some trees, the branches giving way under his weight as if they were strands of uncooked spaghetti. Light broke through. Khulu stepped out into the open with Olly on his heels. They had come to a small clearing.

Olly squinted, shading his eyes with his hand against the bright sunlight. In the middle of the clearing was a rhino, slumped in an unnatural position on the grass. All around her head, the grass was stained with blood. Above her half a dozen vultures circled. A black-back jackal was nosing at the corpse but it fled into the thicket as Khulu and Olly arrived. Olly's eyes moved over the lifeless body. Her armour-plated grey skin was unmarked except for a single bullet hole at the back of her head. But where her horns should have stood proud on her snout, there were only two grotesquely crumpled deep holes. This was where all the leaking blood came from.

Phineas and the Bentleys appeared at the tree fringe. They drew in their breath simultaneously and came to stand beside Olly. Khulu tasted the air around the fallen rhino with his trunk. He shook his head sharply and trumpeted loudly – one furious, protesting note. Then he stomped across the clearing, broke through the tree cover on the opposite side and was gone.

Phineas knelt down next to the once-magnificent, murdered animal.

'Poachers,' he said grimly.

## WHAT WAS SHE LIKE, MY MOTHER?

'You didn't hear a shot?' asked Ambrose Wilson.

'Nothing,' confirmed Phineas 'And we were in the area all morning, from just after six.'

'They would have had a .458 calibre rifle. Quiet and lethal.' Ambrose Wilson shook his head. 'They must have shot her while you were right there, maybe an hour before you found her. The hyenas hadn't even got to her yet and the flesh hadn't started to decompose. 'That's why the vultures were circling like that and the black-back jackal was there – waiting for the hyenas to come and tear through her armour and open her up.'

He got up from the desk and paced the room.

'Those bastards – they'll be out of the reserve now. They are highly organized, heavily armed professionals, the rhino and ivory poachers. This isn't some-one picking off an impala for the pot. You know what these guys do? They carry three or four different pairs of shoes in their kit and they keep changing their shoes. So when we try to track 'em we get muddled and we lose the tracks. I can't believe they've done it again. And a pregnant southern white rhino female, *nogal* – a prime breeding animal.' He banged his hand on his desk in frustration, 'And all for what? Because some rich idiots in China think the horns make good medicine. Which they don't!'

Emma felt sorry for the big man. They had hurried back from their unlovely discovery, found Ambrose Wilson in his office and led him to the dead rhino. When they got there they saw that things were even worse than they had realized because hyenas had appeared on the scene by now and were gnawing into the rhino's belly. Amongst the disgorged entrails were the remains of a rhino foetus.

They had driven silently back to the camp and gathered in Ambrose Wilson's office while he radioed their parents to come and get them. As they waited Ambrose Wilson railed on and on about the lost rhino. But Emma could understand his anger.

It was very upsetting to see all the blood and guts and the little dead rhino baby. It would be horrible for any animal to suffer that fate but Ambrose had told them on the way out to the rhino what a rare and special animal a southern white rhino was, and how terribly expensive they were. It must be absolutely gutting for him to lose one.

Olly saw the Renault van pull up outside the office. Tata's field ranger said goodbye to Tata and Abby, and got out of the van. It wasn't Reckson Nyonka – the ranger who usually accompanied Tata – Reckson had had the day off to visit family who lived outside the park.

'Ambrose – thanks for radioing us.' Abby and Jack looked at the children with concern. 'Are you alright?' There was a flurry of questions and consolations and then Tata put his hand on Olly's shoulder and they walked back to their tent. Abby and Emma and Christopher went off to their own tent.

'I'm sorry you had to see that, Olly. It can't have been very nice.'

'It wasn't.'

It was noon already, and despite the shock of the dead rhino, Olly's stomach was growling. Tata made them both ham and cucumber sandwiches. They sat at the little table on the veranda and ate together. After they had finished the sandwiches Tata said: 'You want some tinned peaches?'

'Yes please.'

But the tin opener was in the van. Tata went to fetch it. He ducked his head under the tent awning as he came back.

'I wish I was tall like you, Tata.'

'Being tall isn't so great. Just more legs to tie yourself in knots with.' Tata eased his long legs under the table and started cutting around the edge of the tin. 'Your mum was a little person. But tough as old boots.'

Olly looked at his father in surprise. Jack hardly ever spoke about Olly's mother. He never ever spoke about his own parents. Once, years ago, it had struck Olly what a very little family they were, just himself and Tata. He'd asked Tata:

'Do you have parents?'

'No.'

'Are they dead?'

'No' Tata had said. 'But they might as well be.'

It was one of very few times that Olly had heard his father sound harsh so he dropped the subject at once.

Now he ventured, cautiously. 'What was she like, my mother?'

'Nikelwa?' Nikelwa was Olly's mother's name. Tata glanced sideways at Olly, 'She was wonderful, Olly. She was a wonderful woman.'

'But you never talk about her.'

Tata bent back the tin lid and spooned half of the can into his bowl and half into Olly's bowl. He passed Olly his share.

'No, it's true, I haven't. Because before, it just made such a hole in my heart thinking about her. But now – with Abby ... I guess we can talk about Nikelwa, if you want to,' He broke off, stirring his spoon in the peaches. 'She was like Abby, in a lot of ways. I mean they come from completely different cultures but Abby reminded me of Nikelwa straight away. Very gentle but also steely and determined in their own way. And both professional women. You know Nikelwa was a botanist? She was doing her PhD in grassland management when she died. She was so clever, your mother. Obviously she was right at the beginning of her career when I lost her but I like to think if she had survived she would have contributed vital work towards our understanding of southern African grassland ecosystems. She won the class medal every year at the University of Cape Town.' He put down the spoon. His voice had grown husky. 'I used to have this dream for a long time after she died. In the dream, she had finished her PhD and she was graduating and she was walking across the stage in her gown and mortarboard. And she was so beautiful! She used to wear her hair very, very short – almost shaven – but she had the most unbelievable bone structure. Everyone used to look at her. At the graduation ceremony everyone was clapping like mad, the vice-chancellor and the rest of the faculty and the students and their parents and everyone. And of course I was bursting with pride over *my* beautiful, clever wife. And you were on the seat next to me, in a baby car seat – you were always in that car seat in my dream, even by the time you were toddling about and learning to talk in my wakeful life. And



then Nikelwa shook the vice-chancellor's hand and he gave her her certificate and she looked up, right at the two of us. And she said: 'Remember me, my boys.'

Tata cleared his throat and sniffed. He picked up his spoon and gazed at it. He still hadn't started on the peaches. Olly saw his eyes had gone watery. He slid his hand over the table into his father's hand, the one that wasn't holding the spoon.

'Abby's wonderful too, Tata.'

Jack looked up. He relaxed and a smile broke over his face.

'You're not wrong there, *umhlobo wami*. She's tippy-top, is Abby.'

'Umhlobo wami' just meant 'my friend' in Xhosa, Olly's mother's first language. It was something Tata tended to call him when they spoke of serious things to one another, like now.

They finished their peaches and went to lie on their beds in the tent. Tata was asleep within minutes. The owls fed nocturnally and he had been up since long before the dawn, studying their frog-snatching behaviour. Olly read through the afternoon. He was getting towards the end of *The Kruger National Park*. There was a particularly interesting section in the book about how the earliest inhabitants of the park, the San people or 'Bushmen' as the Europeans called them, learnt to fish without fishing rods and lines. Apparently they would make cuts in the branches of euphorbia trees, and harvest the milky latex that dripped out. Then they would soak dry grass with the latex, tie the grass around rocks and throw the rocks into pools. The poisonous toxins in the euphorbia were strong enough to paralyse the fish, which would come floating up to the surface, but not so strong that you couldn't eat the fish you caught.

Tata woke up as the shadows were beginning to lengthen. Olly marked his place with a bookmark and put the book under the pillow. He had fashioned the bookmark himself by cutting the cover section of an empty rectangular matchbox and smoothing it out. The matches were called LION SAFETY MATCHES. They boasted a red-inked picture of a male lion with a magnificent mane, resting sphinx-like with his forelegs outstretched and his hind legs curled underneath him.

'Let's go and swim,' suggested Tata. So they did. They had just finished their swim and were back at the tent toweling themselves dry when Olly heard:

'Olly?'

He wrapped the towel round his middle and went out onto the veranda. It was Emma.

'Hey Olly. Do you and your dad want to come and barbecue at our tent tonight? We had bushbabies visiting last night. I'm sure they'll come again tonight.'

Olly glanced at Tata. Tata looked pleased. They took some meat from their refrigerator and followed Emma back to her tent. Abby had gone to the trouble of making an array of salads – a bean salad, and a lettuce-and-tomato salad, and a fruit salad, which she'd set out on the table. The embers for the barbecue were already glowing when they arrived.

Jack said: 'Put your feet up, Ab. I'll braai.'

Olly and Jack didn't call a barbecue a barbecue – they called it a braai, pronounced *bry*. Emma announced that she was going to say braai from now on as well.

'English people don't say braai,' objected Christopher.

'Olly's English and he does.'

'Who cares what Olly does,' hissed Christopher, loud enough for Emma to hear but not anyone else. Although Olly did hear.

Night closed in on them, in its rapid African way. They were just finishing the fruit salad when there sounded a series of loud, scurrying thumps over the tent roof. Then the branches of the lala palm which stood next to the tent shook, and down from the tree shone three pairs of enormous yellow eyes.

They played their torches over the tree. The bushbabies looked a little like cats, except much cuddlier and funnier. They had long, fluffy tails and big round ears and pointy little faces with desperately serious expressions. They were noisy too, croaking and chittering away to each other as they foraged in the lala palm leaves.

'They love the lala palm fruit – that's why they're at yours,' said Olly 'We don't have any lala palms near us.'

Olly and Jack stayed at the Bentleys for nearly two hours, chatting and finishing their meal with hot chocolate and biscuits. Eventually Jack said it was time

to go, as they all had to be up early. He kissed Abby on the cheek. Then Abby did something she had never done before. She put her arms around Olly and kissed him on his forehead.

‘Night, boy-boy.’

She may as well have punched Christopher in the stomach. That was how she kissed him and Emma, on the forehead like that. Other people she kissed on the cheek. Or didn’t kiss, preferably. And *boy-boy* was one of her names for *him*. It wasn’t an especially special name, like Cistoppa, but nevertheless there was no-one else she referred to as ‘boy-boy’. Until now.

Christopher, sitting on the veranda edge, watched Olly and Jack Beyers leave through narrowed eyes. His resentment was so strong he could almost chew on it. He could certainly taste it. It tasted exactly like chicory, a kind of bitter lettuce their mother brought from time to time.

Olly walked a few yards away. Then he looked back over his shoulder and his eyes met Christopher’s. He smiled. Christopher scowled, feeling his teeth grit. He stood up, turned his back on the Beyers and went inside the tent.

## **KHULU'S RAGE**

A day passed. The day after that, Olly was down at the perimeter fence that overlooked the Letaba river. There was a large waterbuck bull that liked to come in the late afternoon and feed at the fence. Waterbuck are a distinctive antelope, with a broad, white ring on their bottoms. And Olly knew it was a bull because only waterbuck bulls have horns.

He'd noticed the waterbuck a week ago, not long after they arrived in Letaba. At this time of day, if nothing else cropped up, he liked to come and watch the bull graze. There was a place where he could scramble down beneath the walkway so that he was right up against the fence. The antelope didn't seem to mind, and Olly could get very close to him. He didn't even need to use his binoculars.

He was watching him feed when a great, grey shape ambled into the edge of his vision. It was Khulu! Olly glanced back at the walkway, expecting commotion and cries of 'Elephant! Elephant!' But the walkway was deserted. The park visitors were all out in their cars at this time, just before dusk.

Khulu got closer and closer, until he was just in front of Olly. The waterbuck retreated. The elephant greeted Olly by rumbling and reaching out with his trunk to touch the wire mesh. Olly put his hand against the mesh.

'Hey Khulu.'

Khulu started to graze. Olly watched him as the air around them grew cool and silky. Khulu had fascinating and delicate table manners. Using his trunk he searched fussily through all possible grasses on the menu, sampling the different scents. Eventually he selected an appealing clod which he plucked and tapped gently on his knee to dislodge the soil from the roots. Then he lifted the clump of grass, placed it in the side of his mouth and clamped down with his molars. The roots drifted away, and an expression of evident pleasure spread across the elephant's face as he savoured the morsel.

He reached for another clump of much longer grass and twirled his trunk around the stems. This clump refused to dislodge. After a moment of tugging, Khulu

bent his head slightly so that the long strands of grass rested on his right tusk. He clamped his jaw shut again, with the grasses firmly trapped in the right side of his jaw and stretched taut over the tip of his right tusk. With his front left foot he gave the base of the clump a good kick. Dust and grass chaff flew up as the clump came loose. Olly pressed his hands together in delight, suddenly realizing how Khulu had come to have that deep groove in his right tusk. It was from years and years of using the tusk to help him thwart stubborn grasses.

The big elephant moved onto a young acacia tree growing next to the fence. He tore the leaves from one of the branches and chewed them. Then he snapped off the branch itself and put it in one side of his mouth. Olly watched as the branch poked through at the other side of his mouth, now white and stripped of all its bark. It was an elephant version of a kebab.

Khulu dropped the branch. He stamped his feet and shook his head. Something had diverted his attention. Something he wasn't happy about.

Olly heard voices above him. He twisted around to look up. It was Ambrose Wilson and Reckson, strolling along the walkway. They were talking to each other in Tsonga so Olly could not understand what they were saying. They could not see him, because from where they were, he was concealed by bushes. But they could see Khulu.

'Khulu, my old friend,' called out Ambrose Wilson. Then he added something else, in Tsonga, and Olly heard Reckson laughing. Ambrose Wilson's voice sounded completely different from the way he usually spoke. Ordinarily, he was booming and jovial. But now, even though Olly couldn't understand what he was saying, his words seemed to have a sly edge. And the way he was calling out to Khulu as a friend ... as if Khulu was a joke. An image of Murray Hicks and Asif Ghaffari flashed in Olly's head.

Khulu trumpeted. He stamped his great dustbin-lid sized foot again and folded his ears horizontally. Olly swivelled back to look at him. Khulu's eyes were clinched on Ambrose Wilson. Moments before, the elephant's soft brown eyes had communicated a sleepy, peaceful warmth to Olly. Now they were iced with fury.

Olly's whole body vibrated with the change in Khulu's mood. He felt suddenly breathless and his stomach hurt. He sank against the soil bank, fighting for air and cradling his stomach as Ambrose Wilson and Reckson passed sniggering above him and Khulu continued to trumpet and stamp.

As Olly lay crumpled in the soil, he had no doubt whatsoever what Khulu felt for Ambrose Wilson. What Khulu felt for Ambrose Wilson was a consuming, crippling hatred.

## TALKING WITH CHRISTOPHER

After the morning expedition Christopher went into the camp shop to buy sweets. It gave Olly a chance to tell Emma what had happened with Khulu. She stared at him as he spoke, her eyes widening in surprise and doubt.

‘But Olly, Ambrose Wilson was so *upset* when he saw the rhino was dead. How could he possibly have had anything to do with killing her?’

‘I don’t know. All I know is that Khulu doesn’t like him. More than doesn’t like him. Hates him.’

Emma shuddered. It was a stomach-churning thought that some-one who seemed so unclesy and nice might be neither of those things. But if Khulu had reacted to the ranger as Olly said he had, he must have had a good reason. What could Khulu have seen to make him so angry?

‘What should we do?’

‘I don’t know! What can we do?’

Christopher came back out of the shop. He said impatiently: ‘Come on, Emma,’ and tugged at her arm, none-too-gently.

She went off with her brother and Olly went back to his own tent. The morning expedition had been longer than usual because they had staked out a hyena den, and sat for ages watching two shaggy, spotty little hyena pups gamble and play-fight over their tired mother while she swatted at them from time to time with her big forepaws. Tata was already back and already asleep, stretched out on his bed. He had left Olly a sandwich with a tin plate over it to keep the flies off. Olly ate the sandwich and went to lie down on his own bed.

\*

*‘Ndlovu – you need to see something.’*

*It is Nokhanyo – the old woman he saw in his dream at Motsumi Lodge the last time he got sick. He recognizes at once her red, white and black cloths, the fringe of beadwork around her forehead and her bottom-of-a-jam-jar spectacles.*

*'I am listening, Nokhanyo.'*

*But she fades. Instead there comes an image of a cloth bag, a dull-brown colour and tied at the neck with a drawstring. He reaches for the bag and loosens the toggle. He feels inside and flinches. He knows what they are as soon as his dream-fingers have touched them.*

*He lays them on the ground before him. Two rhino horns. They have been cleaned of blood. They are rough, brown and conical. Not attached to a rhino, they look absurd and tragic.*

*The image of the horns also fades. A wall of heat blazes up in front of Olly. He seems to be in a kind of pit now, a circular pit with a thatched roof. Facing him is a strange meter-high three-sided stone structure. There are slits in the walls of the structure and as he looks down at it he can see that densely packed material is burning inside. As he watches and his eyes grow accustomed to the heat, he registers that it is night and that he is not alone. On each side of the structure squats an almost naked black man, skin running with sweat. Each man has a pair of bellows, made from impala skin. They are intent on working their bellows so that they pump a constant stream of air into the slits. A fourth man approaches the fire. He dips his hand into a pot which stands against the pit wall and scoops out a handful of a white powdery substance which he flings into the fire. There is a hot sizzle and the flames burn brighter.*

*Olly sees now what it is. It is a smelting furnace. And the men are metalsmiths. They are melting the ore.*

\*

Olly bolted upright, breathing hard. Tata stirred on his bed and mumbled. But he didn't wake up. Olly tiptoed out of the tent as quietly as he could. Then he ran down the road towards the four-bed tents. The Bentleys glass door was slid shut. He peered through the glass. Abby and Christopher were sleeping but Olly could see Emma on her stomach, reading his *Kruger National Park* book. He had



finished it yesterday and leant it to her. It had taken him over a week to read but, being Emma, he could see she was nearing the end.

Emma looked up and saw him. He put a finger to his lips. She put the book down and slid back the door, just enough to squeeze through. They went to sit on the veranda of one of the other, empty tents.

'The horns! The rhino horns! I know where they are!'

'You do? Where? How do you know?'

He caught his breath. In his excitement, he hadn't anticipated that she would ask the obvious question.

'I can't tell you. But you have to believe me.'

'Oh-kay' she said slowly. Her green eyes narrowed thoughtfully. 'So where are they?'

'I don't know exactly. But it's not far – I'm sure it's not far. It's a place where – they melt metal there. But it's not a factory. It's like -,' and he described it to her: the stone furnace, the impala skin bellows, the almost-naked sweating men. 'They melt metal there,' he repeated 'We need to find out where they melt metal.'

Emma's eyes had un-narrowed as he spoke. They had grown wider and wider.

'You're talking about the Masorini ruins!'

'Am I?'

'Yes! I'm certain of it. The ruins at Masorini, near the Phalaborwa gate. There was an iron smelting foundry there. They don't melt metal there now. But they did in the nineteenth century. The whole site has been reconstructed. I've just read about it. It's in your book!'

There were bits of the book he'd skipped because they weren't about animals or plants. But Emma wasn't a skipper when it came to books. She always read every single bit.

'We'll ask Phineas to take us there tomorrow', she said decisively 'And we have to tell Christopher straight away. He could keep Phineas busy while we try to find the horns. We can't tell Phineas what we're up to – he'll think we're crazy.'

Olly glanced at her. He felt a surge of gratitude that she, Emma, clearly didn't think he was crazy, indeed, was prepared to formulate whole plans of action based on his reading of an elephant's mood, and a weird intuition that he wouldn't spell out for her. But ...

'We can't tell Christopher.'

'We *must* tell Christopher. I can't keep a secret from Christopher.'

'But he hates me, Emma. He won't believe me.'

'He will when we find the horns. And he doesn't hate you. He hasn't let himself get to know you. He hates the idea of you. But he has to get over it. Another animal could get killed very soon. We *have* to find out what's going on. I'm going to talk to him tonight.' She looked at Olly sombrely, 'Olly, I can't keep a secret from him. He's my brother. I mean, we fight and everything and I get mad at him but there are certain things you can't do with your brother. Like keeping a really big secret. It's just in the rules.'

'That must be nice,' said Olly softly.

\*

They braaied at the Bentleys' tent again that night. The bushbabies came back and entertained everyone by leaping down from the tent roof to snatch a bunch of bananas that Abby had left hanging on the tent veranda railing. They divided the bananas up rapidly and noisily and ate them on the spot, shoving banana mash into their mouths with their versatile little hands and littering the ground beneath the lala palm with fragments of banana skin.

After Christopher had finished his meal he took a lantern and went to lie on his bed and read a comic book. Emma followed him inside.

'What do you want?' he said. He'd been short with her ever since she'd changed her mind about Olly.

'Just to talk. Can we talk a bit?'

He grunted but he did shift over and slide the comic under his pillow. Emma lay down next to him.

'What's going on, Chris?'

'What's going on with you! You've been yakking away to Jack Beyers the whole night. He's not your Dad!'

Emma was silent for a moment. She cocked her head to one side and scrunched up her nose.

'Can you see Dad?'

Christopher twisted his head and looked at her as if she had lost her marbles.

'Of course I can't see Dad. He isn't here.'

'No, I mean in your head. Can you still see what he looks like? I try to make a picture of him in my head and he's gone fuzzy.'

Christopher looked away.

'We saw him in December, Chris, and it's April. Four months is too long. It should have been too long for him. He shouldn't have cancelled our trip. That's the last thing he should have done.'

'But he had to go to Argentina!'

'No, he didn't have to go, Chris. He chose to go'.

It wasn't nice to say, and it didn't feel great, but it was the truth and Christopher had to face up to it. She added gently:

'Jack Beyers, he chose to invite us here.'

Christopher dropped his face into the bedding. Some moments passed in silence. Then he turned over and sat up, hugging his knees. Emma also changed her position, nestling cross-legged beside him. Now they could see Jack and Abby and Olly, seated in chairs around the fire.

'Chris, look at her. Look at her face.'

Abby's face was bathed in firelight. She was laughing. She looked slender and pretty in her white cargo trousers and summer tee-shirt.

'She loves him, Chris.'

'She loved Dad.'

'But she never looked like this with Dad. Don't you remember? She always looked ... anxious. She was forever jumping up to do things.'

Christopher sunk his chin onto his knee. He must remember the fighting, the same as she did. There had been so much of it.

'Jack is lovely, Chris. Like she said on that website. He is a lovely man. Things could have been much worse.'

'He's all right,' admitted Christopher. 'But he comes with Olly. And Olly's a disaster. I know he's your new best mate but if Mum stays with Jack, what am I supposed to say to Alfie Pattison?'

Personally, Emma couldn't see how anyone could care less what Alfie Pattison did or thought. But she could see it did matter to Chris.

'You'll sort it, Chris. Those boys at school, Alfie and them, they always copy you anyway. If you wear your cap backwards so do they. And if you turn it round again, so do they. Haven't you noticed?'

He rubbed his chin over where his jeans stretched tight across his knee. Of course he'd noticed. But that was exactly why he didn't need Oliver Beyers messing with his popularity. Or with the most important people in his life.

'If Mum carries on with Jack,' a shameful unsteadiness was creeping into his voice. 'What does that make Olly? Your brother?'

'Oh Chris,' she punched him lightly on his shoulder. 'You'll always be my first, first brother.'

Christopher hugged his knees tighter.

'I didn't want any of this to happen, Em,' he croaked. 'Not to us. Other people's dads go off. Other people's parents get divorced. It shouldn't have been us.'

Emma pressed against him. Most of the time when they touched each other, it was for shoulder punches or Chinese bangles. But now she hugged him hard, and she kissed him on his forehead like their mother often did. She glanced back at the little group around the fire. Olly had been staring into the flames but at that moment he lifted his head and caught her eye. He nodded.

Emma put her mouth to Christopher's ear.

'Chris,' she said very, very softly. 'There is something else I have to talk to you about.'

## THE MASORINI RUINS

The jeep motored along the tar road, towards the Phalaborwa gate.

'Giraffe to the left,' said Phineas, slowing.

'No, go on!' urged Olly and Emma simultaneously. Emma added:

'We really want to see the ruins!'

Phineas looked surprised but he picked up the pace again. Christopher watched the giraffe grow smaller and smaller until she melted into the bushwillow woodlands. He leant his cheek against the jeep's roof support, as the tall olive-green tree clusters swept by. He'd told Emma last night that Olly was bonkers and that his bonkeriness was clearly catching because Emma was showing all the signs of going bonkers too.

'Just come with us, Chris,' she'd urged. 'Maybe he's right and maybe he's not. But if he is right ... don't you want to be there? What are you going to do otherwise? Mooch around the camp all morning?'

So he'd come, because he supposed that bonkers rhino-horn detecting had to be more fun than left-behind camp mooching. But for the record, this was *insane* and Oliver Beyers was a nut-case.

They veered off the tar road and into a sandy parking space at the bottom of a steep hill. They all got out of the jeep. Ahead of them was a small building. A man emerged from the doorway and walked over to them.

'Welcome to the Masorini ruins,' he said 'I am James, official tour guide. Would you like a free tour of the ruins?'

He led them along a path, stopping in front of a thatched structure with open sides and a stone pit inside it.

'This was the furnace where they melted the ore to get out the iron. They would pack layers of charcoal and ore in here, and over here in these openings they would blow in air with their bellows to keep the fire hot.'

It was just as Olly had seen it in his dream. He was beginning to feel a little odd. Luminous yellow slugs floated in and out of his vision, the kind of slugs that

sometimes appear behind your eyelids when you are very weary and you knuckle your eyes hard. Also, a whispering *whit-whit-whitting* of tiny air movements around his head, as if a swarm of invisible butterflies were circling him.

'All of these huts were the metal-workers huts,' James was saying. He indicated three white-plastered thatched huts standing in a triangle. 'That hut, over there, was for the chief's first wife. And that hut behind was the kitchen and the hut behind that was the granary.' He showed them how the hut floors were made with smoothed, hardened cow dung: a technique still used today.

They walked on until they were right up against the base of the hill.

'Up there,' pointed James, 'That was the sangoma's hut. He had the highest status in the community after the chief so his hut was built above everyone else's.'

'What's a sangoma?' asked Emma.

'A sangoma? A sangoma is a traditional healer, a man or woman who knows herbal medicine and divination. In the past, you white people used to call them witchdoctors.'

'I've heard of witchdoctors,' said Christopher 'They hang out with ghosts. *Wooo wooo!*' He waved his hands in a ghostly manner.

'They do not 'hang out with ghosts,' said James reprovingly 'They are able to communicate with their ancestors in the spirit world, for advice and guidance.'

'It's a bad medicine' said Phineas abruptly. 'Our Christian church forbids it.'

'But I am a Christian,' said James 'and if things are wrong with myself or my family, I will consult our sangoma.'

'That is wrong-headed,' said Phineas.

'It is not wrong-headed. It is about old ways and new ways, old learning and new learning, brought together.'

'There is no business for a Christian man or woman ...'

\*

*'Ndlovu – look up.'*

*The whit-whitting-whitting distills into Nokhanyo's deep, calm voice. He flinches. Nokhanyo is from the sleeping life, not the life of the world. She doesn't come like this. But -*

*'Ndlovu, look up. Past the healing hut. Look up.'*

*He raises his head, creases his eyes.*

\*

'What is that hut, that hut right up there?'

Emma had been frowning at Phineas and the tour guide. For reasons she couldn't follow, they had suddenly launched into a full-blown argument. But now she peered at where Olly was pointing. Far up on the brow of the hill, she made out the conical thatch of another hut.

'That was the chief's hut,' said James.

'They put the chief all the way up there? What – was he stinky?'

She was only trying to be funny because of the tension that had sprung up between the two men. Phineas did laugh but the tour guide didn't.

'The chief's hut is high on the hill for the same reason the sangoma's hut is high on the hill,' he said primly. 'Their lives mattered more than anyone else's lives. If enemies attacked they were able to escape in good time.'

'I want to go to that hut,' said Olly.

'Do you?' Christopher felt doubtful. Why climb all the way up there just to look at a hut identical to the other huts in front of which they were already standing.

'Yes,' said Olly firmly. He turned to Phineas. 'Phineas, I know steep climbs are difficult for you because of the buffalo hurting your leg when you were a boy. But you needn't come. We won't be long.'

'All right,' said the ranger. 'I'll wait here. Remember to announce yourselves for the snakes.'

He'd already taught them that if they walked through long grass they should make a continuous loud noise to act as a warning for snakes to move off. Christopher was almost going to say he would wait with Phineas when he changed his mind. Olly Beyers might have tricked Emma into believing his crap but everyone knew girls were daft anyway. He, Chris, was going to need a lot more convincing. But, if there was even the teeniest little chance that they might find the horns .... he'd never forgive himself if he missed out on it.

Emma and Olly started up the hill. Emma decided to warn the snakes by singing. She settled on Land Of Hope And Glory because it had a rousing and strident tune, hopefully offputting to snakes.

*'Land of Hope and Glor- eeee*

*Mother of the Freeeee.*

*How shall we EXTOL thee, who are born of thee?*

*Wider still, and WIDER ...',*

She had a clear, sweet, strong voice. She'd been in the choir at school before she'd been chucked out by the temperamental choir teacher for giving her some advice about her off-key piano playing. Christopher noticed that Emma had brought her school satchel with her. The incongruous red square with FINCHLEY CENTRAL PRIMARY printed on it in black lettering bobbed up the hill in front of him. It's to put the horns in, thought Christopher. Good grief. She really is convinced that Olly can find them. He huffed after Olly and Emma, who were spanking up the hill like two Olympic contenders. Behind him, he heard rising voices as Phineas and James resumed their disagreement over their differing religious beliefs.

They drew level with the sangoma's hut. Olly stopped.

'Here?' said Emma.

'No.' But his eyes were playing over the hut.

'Why are you stopping, Olly?'

He collected himself, and they pressed on up the hill. When they got to the chief's hut, they stopped again. It was a simple, thatched, plastered hut, just like the others at the bottom of the hill, although with an orange design around the doorway. They went inside. Like the huts below, it boasted a large square reed sleeping mat rolled out on the floor, with two stone headrests resting on the mat. The only difference was that the floor of this hut had not been laid with cow dung. It was still bare earth.

Emma glanced at Olly. His eyes had glazed over and Emma had the sudden impression that he wasn't actually in his body.

'Olly? Olly – are you going to have a fit?'

Olly's eyes sprang into focus.



'Here.' He knelt down and peeled back the mat. His hands hovered over the earth and then with his forefinger he inscribed a circle into the dust. 'We have to dig here.'

'With what?' said Christopher. 'The ground looks pretty solid.' But Olly had already opened Emma's school satchel and extricated a small shovel.

'Where did you get a spade?' asked Christopher, surprised.

'Tata keeps it in the van. For if he has to make a poop when he's out in the bush.'

Christopher eyed the shovel.

'I hope you washed it.'

But Olly had already started chipping away at the ground.

'Let me.' said Christopher impatiently. This was obviously ridiculous but he was kind of getting into it now. 'I'm stronger.'

The earth looked hard but actually when you started digging it was more crumbly than you would have expected. As if someone had dug it up already and then repacked it. Was it possible that ...

The shovel met something resistant. Christopher put it down.

'I hit something.'

'Let's use our hands.' said Olly.

They all started scooping at the crumbled, orange-brown soil. A scrap of brown cloth appeared. They scraped around it. Nestling in the cavity was a brown cloth bag, tied at the neck with a drawstring. Olly lifted it out. He loosened the drawstring's toggle and tipped the contents of the bag onto the ground.

The three of them sat back on their heels, staring silently.

'Oh my days,' said Christopher eventually. 'Oh my days, Olly.'

\*

Tata had been talking to Hubert, but he turned to Olly.

'You've been a bit quiet all evening, *umhlobo wami*. Everything okay?'

'Yes, everything's fine.'

'You sure?'

'Yes, Tata. I'm just in a mood for reading.'

'Okay. Hubert, it's really interesting that plants that use birds as pollinators so often develop red petals and hardly ever have a scent. But logical because, of course, few birds have any sense of smell. I've often thought ...'

Olly was curled up in a corner of the veranda, reading a book, while Jack and the ethnobotanist from Bavaria reclined in the veranda chairs, sharing ideas about their work and chatting in general. The German had found all the samples he needed and was planning to leave the next day. Jack and Olly had shared a farewell braai with him, and he hadn't yet gone back to his own tent.

'... but that's just a theory – I haven't yet found real evidence to prove it. I hope you have a good drive south tomorrow, Hubert. I'm almost done here myself – I've got nearly all the data I need to complete my paper. When I'm done I'll just kick back and spend a couple of days hanging out with Abby and the kids before we head back to the UK. They say it's finally warming up there, thank goodness. You want another beer?'

'Ja, pliz. Zat would be nice.'

Jack opened the fridge.

'Darn – we're out of beer. And the shop's shut now. Sorry Hubert.'

'I haf some whisky in my tent. I'll just go and get it.'

He started to heave his large body out of his chair. Olly felt a sudden, strange sensation between his shoulder blades, like a light prod.

'I'll get it for you, Hubert.'

'Ah, sank you Olly. It is just on ze bedside tebble.'

Olly stood up and went to the neighbouring tent. He felt for the electric light switch and turned it on. He could see Hubert had already begun making preparations for an early start. There were two suitcases on the bed he wasn't using, one of which was packed with clothes folded into precise, almost geometric squares, and lots of pairs of the bobbly, peculiar socks that Hubert liked. The other suitcase had been specially adapted. It held a layer of grey foam with lots of small holes cut into the foam. Each hole was snugly filled with a glass jar. Curious, Olly leant over the suitcase. Each jar contained a fragment of root. The ethnobotanist had labeled the jars in neat spidery writing, detailing the common name of the plant,

as well as the scientific name and the place where he had collected the sample. He had also glued a small colour photograph onto each jar of the plant from which he had gathered the root. Olly picked up one jar, then another.

Outside Tata and Hubert had started to talk about university life.

'May's always crazy,' Tata was saying cheerfully. 'All the undergraduate marking comes rolling in boom-bang-bang. It's a steam train. I'm generally flattened by the end of May.'

'I will be taking my vyver at the end of June.' said Hubert. Olly frowned and then realized he meant his Viva – the scary test PhD students faced at the end of their degree when they had to stand up in front of a panel of experts in their own field, and talk about what made their research unique and important. 'If my vyver goes vell, I will be offered a post at ze Technical University of Munich. After all zis years, it will be most amusing to be part of university life, as a teacher and not a student.'

'Amusing is an interesting way to put it. Sometimes I feel distinctly less than amused when my students ....'

Olly stopped listening and reached for another jar. He read:

**Devil's Claw Root (*harpogophytum procumbens*)**

**Kalahari desert**

Pasted above this label was a photograph of a small shrub with spreading stems growing an inch or two above a sandy surface. Nestling between the blue-green leaves were tubular flowers of a deep mauve-pink with a yellow and white throat.

*'Remember this flower. It is from a plant which makes a very good medicine for fevers. When you see it again the flower will not be there. Only a picture of it and far from where it grows. But the medicine will be saved. And you must take it. You will remember. You are like me. Once you learn a medicine plant, you never forget it.'*

The jar felt smooth and a little cold in Olly's hand despite the warm sub-tropical air. He closed his hand tightly around the glass, and slid it swiftly into his pocket.

## A NIGHT IN THE BUSH

'I wish I had proper game ranger clothes like Phineas', said Christopher to his mother. 'I know all this stuff about the bush now but I'm still wearing shorts and trainers and my old Arsenal shirt like any kid from Finchley. I want to look like a real ranger.'

'Don't worry, Chris,' said Abby teasingly. 'Maybe for your next birthday we can buy you a pair of khaki socks.'

'I'm being serious, Mum. These clothes aren't durable enough anyway. Look.' He reached for the shirt he had discarded earlier at the poolside and showed her where a thorn had ripped the fabric.

'Chris, we're leaving Kruger tomorrow. What are you going to do with bush clothes in Finchley?'

'But for next time! We'll be back again soon, won't we? All the birds Jack researches are African birds.'

She looked pleased when he said that, and she reached out and stroked him on his wet cheek. He ducked, dived under the water, and went back to practising his new pool trick – the underwater triple-somersault. Only it was still a two-and-a-half somersault because he tended to get disoriented on the third round and surface sideways, spluttering for air.

It was a hot morning. Jack had finished his work so they had all been out for a game drive together. And after the drive they were positively boiling so they'd come for a swim.

Christopher broke the surface. Then he sunk to eye-level again, like a hippo, and watched Jack watching Abby. Abby had on a new bikini, with a pattern of sea-horses on it. She had finished swimming and was perched on the side of the pool, drying off, her legs dangling in the water. Jack swam over to her. He kissed her knee and flicked a few drops of water at her. Then he swam off.

Christopher felt a bit funny watching that. Emma was right though. Their mum did love Jack, and he definitely loved her back. He could see why too. Apart

from being nice, she had a suntan now and her cheeks had a healthy glow. She was really pretty for an old person and she dressed nicely and brushed her hair and went for jogs so her body was a nice shape too. Jack Beyers was lucky to have her. Christopher sighed. He supposed he'd get used to things being this way. As long as once they got back, Jack and his mother never ever ever kissed or flirted anywhere near Finchley Central Primary.

It had been three days since they had discovered the rhino horns, days which had been frustrating and enjoyable at the same time. Enjoyable because getting to know Olly Beyers, the real Olly Beyers, was fun and it felt good to stop having to remember to ignore him all the time. But frustrating because there was no change in Ambrose Wilson's and Reckson's behaviour. Whenever Emma, Christopher and Olly saw either of the rangers, or the two of them together, they seemed exactly the same as they had always seemed. They kept expecting a sudden change in demeanour when Ambrose Wilson and Reckson discovered the rhino horns were gone. But Ambrose Wilson kept right on booming and smiling, and Reckson remained quiet and inscrutable. And all the while, the horns lay under Emma's bed, inside her school rucksack which in turn was wrapped in a blanket.

They were convinced that Ambrose Wilson and Reckson were responsible for killing the rhino. But without any proof to connect the two of them to the discovery of the horns, what could they do? And they were due to leave the Kruger National Park the next day.

Emma and Christopher were still a bit puzzled as to how Olly had actually known about the horns. He just said that he had a dream and it was lucky Emma knew what the dream meant. But he seemed reluctant to talk about it any further.

'Em, Chris – Jack wants to go over some of his owl notes with me. When you're done swimming, do you want to invite Olly over for lunch at our tent? There's not much left now but you can see what you can find.'

'Okay Mum'.

They dried themselves and went back to the tent and made peanut butter sandwiches and orange squash with tinned pineapple for pudding. Christopher said: 'Should we go and play baseball on the lawn?' One of the rangers, whose

children attended boarding school during the week, had lent them a baseball bat and ball.

They made their way over to the meadow in front of the river-view walkway. Christopher was the batsman and Olly bowled and Emma fielded. After a while she said she was starting to not feel very well, and she wanted to sit down under the trees, so Olly bowled and fielded as well.

Emma lay on her stomach underneath an apple-leaf tree. She had had a headache all morning which she had put down to the heat. But now her tummy was starting to ache as well. In fact she felt a bit achy and weak all over. It was annoying because she hated being sick, and she had already had her spring cold for this year. She supposed she must have caught a bug on the plane on the way out to Africa. Could a bug have hidden in her body for nearly two weeks? She watched Olly hare over the lawn with outstretched arms, hands cupped. He'd been rubbish at first when the ranger leant them the bat and ball a couple of days ago but he was already much improved. Christopher had been out with him on the lawns for an hour and a half before dusk yesterday, catching and throwing, catching and throwing.

'It's just practise, Olly. You have to train your hand and your eye to work together. You just have to keep at it.'

\*

*'Ndlovu!'*

*'Sanna, not now. Please go away. Can't you see? He likes me now – we're having fun. I don't want to listen to you now.'*

*'But Ndlovu – the big man you are watching is getting ready to hunt the elephant you love. He has gone to pass water in the bathroom. You only have a few minutes. You must run and hide in his truck.'*

*'WHAT?'*

\*

Emma watched Olly drop his arms. The ball thudded on the grass next to him but he didn't notice because he was racing in the direction of Emma and Christopher's tent.

'Olly?'

But he had already vanished from sight. Emma propped herself up on her elbow, accusingly.

'Did you say something horrible to him, Chris?'

'No, of course not!'

They stared mystified at the gap between the rondavels where he had disappeared. But then he re-appeared, his survival pack strapped to his shoulders.

'Come!'

'Olly?'

'Just *COME!*

He was racing in the direction of the camp gate. Emma got up and ran after him. Christopher glanced at the bat in his hand. He'd sworn on his life that the baseball kit would be ready and waiting when the ranger's kid got back from boarding school on Friday afternoon. He picked up the ball, ran over to the nearest empty rondavel and tossed the bat and ball inside. Hopefully there was a lost property system here. It was the best he could do anyway. He sped after Emma and Olly.

Three identical green park jeeps stood side by side in the parking bays. Christopher saw Olly skid to a halt, his head whipping from one to another. For a moment he went completely still, almost limp, his eyes unseeing. Then he nodded and he sprang over the side of the middle jeep and crouched in the cavity behind the last and the second last row of seats. Emma climbed in beside him, more slowly. Christopher looked left and right but there was no-one around. He vaulted over the metal edge and slid into the seatwell next to his sister and Olly.

'What are you *doing*, Olly?'

'*Shhhhhh! Breathe less!*

A minute passed in which they concentrated on catching their breath. Then two pairs of boots struck the tar on which the jeep was parked. The doors on each side of the vehicle creaked open and the engine whined into life. They huddled together as the top of the gate posts flashed over their heads. There was a loud report as they shuddered over the iron cattle bars that kept animals from entering the camp while the gates were open.

'Right next to the stream, you're sure?'

'*Pfumela*. An hour ago. But he won't have moved far. He's too old, that one.'

'Bastard elephant.' There was a grim satisfaction in Ambrose Wilson's voice. 'I've been waiting months to get him in the right location.'

After that, the two men fell silent. The hum of the tyres over the ground quickly turned into a steady crunch. They had turned off the tar road and onto the gravel road. The mopane scrub canopy whipped by and, for an instant, the graceful neck and pointed muzzle of a giraffe. Christopher's foot had gone to sleep. He shifted his position, which brought on a bout of pins and needles. It was excruciating, and of course the only thing you can do about pins and needles in your foot is to stamp hard. But there was no chance of that. Changing his position had brought Emma into view, and he noticed that she was shivering. She was probably scared. He felt a bit scared himself. He put his hand over hers reassuringly.

The jeep slowed and they felt themselves turning. After perhaps another twenty minutes, Reckson said:

'Here. Up the stream here.'

*Bump bump bump*. They were jolting along a very rough, rutted track, tearing carelessly at overhead tree branches as they went. They bounced over a stone and Olly's head smacked hard against his tucked-up bony knee. He winced, pushing the palm of his hand against his mouth.

The jeep slowed again. Ambrose Wilson spoke at last.

'There you are, my big boy. I couldn't have situated you better if I'd plonked you there myself.'

His voice became business-like.

'Okay Reckson – here are the shoes for the tracks'. They heard the sound of boots being eased off, and the gritty snap of laces being tied. 'So, you're sure on the game plan? From here to the stream is rocks so you won't leave tracks. And then you walk upstream. You'll come out of the stream beyond the bend up there by that gigantic sycamore tree where the big boulders are and then you'll leave some nice big clear tracks right up to Khulu. Except of course Khulu won't be there to give you



a hello kiss because old Ambrose will have been to visit, and Khulu will be chatting to the Great Mother Elephant in the sky.'

Emma and Christopher stiffened. They glanced at each other, appalled.

'Because I will have got a good shot at him from here. You chop out the tusks and you carry them up the stream and bury them in the reed bank. Working fast it won't take you more than forty-five minutes. Nobody will think to look for the tusks right here – they'll assume the poachers carried them out of the reserve. And you'll be lead tracker in the investigation anyway so you keep them away from the reed beds. Bury the shoes as well. You'll come back down the stream and back into the jeep. Then we'll drive up to Khulu and we'll see what's happened and we'll hell-for-leather back to camp to put out the word that the poachers have nabbed the best pair of tusks in the park. Candy from a baby. You sure you got it?'

'Yes, boss. I got it, boss.'

There came the feathery sound of air being sucked through nostril hair.

'We have to work quickly. The wind is changing – he's going to smell us.'

They heard a quiet click. Emma, Christopher and Olly peeked cautiously over the top of the seat in front of them. About two hundred yards away at the edge of a small stream, Khulu was peacefully browsing. Ambrose Wilson had raised his rifle. He was squinting through the telescopic sight. They saw the fractional movement as his forefinger began to close on the trigger.

*'KHULU RUN!'*

*'GO GO GO, KHULU!'*

*'KHULU, WATCH OUT!'*

All three of them were shouting at the same time. Khulu's great tusked head reared up. Elephants have poor eyesight and from where Khulu browsed, the jeep would have been little more than a green blur and Ambrose Wilson and his rifle almost invisible. But he heard the children's voices and he heard the warning in their cries. The great elephant plunged into the undergrowth just as the bullet whistled past where he had been standing a moment before. There was a sharp echoing crack as the bullet struck a boulder.

Ambrose Wilson and Reckson spun around. Ambrose Wilson's eyes sprang wide-open, then narrowed almost to slits. There was nothing nice or kindly in them now. They were ice-blue, malevolent and very, very angry.

'You little turd-brains. You have no idea who you just messed with.'

\*

Ambrose Wilson and Reckson lost no time in meting out a punishment to the children. Ambrose Wilson ordered them to climb out of the jeep. While Reckson stood by with the elephant rifle aimed at their heads, Ambrose Wilson grabbed hold of Christopher. He stripped the Arsenal T-shirt from the wriggling boy, and confiscated Olly's survival pack. Then he tied them all up tightly to a big leadwood tree. The two adults stood back from the tree, scrutinizing their handiwork.

'Are you going to shoot us?' Emma meant to keep her voice defiant, but she heard the quaver in it and she could see Ambrose Wilson did too.

'Shoot you? No, of course not. Nice Uncle Ambrose wouldn't shoot some sweet little boys and girls out on holiday from England, would he? Besides -' his tone was pure malice 'there's really no need. I don't want you found with bullets in you, do I? If I want to get rid of you, I've got plenty of bush friends who can do the job for me. Listen!'

They stopped chafing their wrists against the ropes which bound them to the leadwood tree and listened. It was the same deep, throbbing grunt that they had often heard whilst out with Phineas, only louder and closer than they had ever heard it before.

'The pickings will be good for the lions tonight. They'll appreciate my little gift, making things so easy for them. They're a lazy bunch are lions, on the whole, if they can get away with it.' He sniffed the stilling air. 'Maybe an hour and a half until dusk and lion dinner-time, I should say.'

'If we don't come home for supper, our parents will send out a search party,' said Emma. 'They'll already be wondering where we are now.'

'I have no doubt.' Ambrose Wilson held up Christopher's Arsenal t-shirt and waved it in front of her nose. 'I'm quite sure they are fretting for their little darlings as we speak. But such an unmistakable shirt, dangling from a branch up near the

Engelhard dam, will tell a good story about where three naughty children decided to play walkabout. I'll be at the head of the search party, of course, and you can rest assured I'll leave no stone unturned in my efforts to find you. After all, who better to follow up your footsteps than a dependable tracker like Reckson.' He gave a big, theatrical sigh, 'Eventually, we'll have to give up, but you can't win every time, can you? And by the time the lions have finished with you, not to mention the hyenas and the black-back jackals and the vultures, you three little turds will be history. It will be a bush mystery. No-one will ever know what happened to those delightful young people from London who sneaked out of camp one day and never came back'.

Olly's survival pack was lying at Ambrose Wilson's feet. He picked it up and cursorily inspected the contents of the pack.

'Doesn't your precious Tata try and keep his little man safe!' He snapped the buckles shut, and threw the pack into the nearby bushes. With that, Ambrose Wilson and Reckson got back into their jeep and drove away.

Emma, Christopher and Olly stood in their stiff, uncomfortable positions, bound as they were to all sides of the leadwood tree. They each only had a partial view of their surroundings: Christopher of the clearing and the track that the jeep had used to enter and leave the mopane scrub; Emma of the stream and the edge of the scrub; and Olly of dense tracts of scrub.

Christopher looked down at the rough two-lane track which ran past him, just a couple of meters from his trainers, before sweeping off into the bush.

'I don't want to make things worse,' he said shakily 'but this is definitely a hippo trail. Look, two trails for the feet of each side. Didn't Phineas say we should stay away from hippo trails at all costs?'

They fought and fought against the ropes until their wrists were raw but it was no good. The rope was strongly made and expertly tied. The heat was seeping out of the day now. The blue sky over their heads softened and the tree tops sharpened into silhouette. A shiny black songololo millipede inched its way slowly along the ground on its rust-coloured fringe of legs, over the tip of Christopher's trainer. A pair of black-collared barbets on a branch above him started up a noisy

bedtime duet. He could see their bright red faces through the leaves. They were soon joined by the dusk song of numerous other birds.

The low grunt pulsed through the bush again. The trees in front of Emma stirred. The way Ambrose Wilson had tied them up, one of her arms rested lightly on Olly's arm and the other on Christopher's arm. She felt both arms stiffen.

The scrub shook again. A branch cracked loudly. Emma closed her eyes. And then she felt Olly's arm relax completely. A warm surge flowed out of him and into Emma. She opened her eyes.

'Khulu, you came back!' She started to cry. It was such a relief. And she was feeling so awful.

Khulu broke through the scrub, his trunk draped over his left tusk. He ambled around the tree, taking in their predicament. Then he undraped his trunk and tasted the air thoughtfully.

'Ambrose Wilson tied us up,' explained Olly 'and we can't get free.' Although he knew Khulu would already have understood exactly what had happened, through his excellent sense of smell.

The great elephant turned and for a moment it looked like he was going to leave them. But he was sniffing and hunting in the nearby bushes with his trunk. He paused and then from a clump of sickle-bush he lifted an object, which he laid carefully at Olly's feet.

'What's he got?' said Christopher? From where he was, he couldn't see.

'Olly's survival pack!' said Emma.

'Khulu,' Olly said quietly 'Khulu, I need you to give me the survival pack in my hands. Can you get it to my hands?'

He wriggled his hands at his sides, opening and closing his fists to attract the elephant's attention.

Khulu rumbled and dipped his head. Olly watched the delicate tip of his trunk curl around the backpack's strap. He squeezed his eyes shut, to focus better on the movement of his hands. He felt the canvas brush his fingertips.

'Keep it there, Khulu. Just there.'

The smooth plastic of the buckle. He felt the indentations and pressed. The tension on the strap released. He worked his fingers over the canvas until he found the other buckle, the huge elephant looming patiently over him. Olly snapped the buckle, tipped the pack and shook. Everything fell out.

Olly looked down. His Leatherman toolset was clearly visible, just next to his foot.

‘Khulu – that – the toolset.’ He gestured as well as he could with his bound foot. ‘Can you pick it up? Can you give it to Christopher?’

‘Can he do it?’ said Emma breathlessly. She couldn’t really see what Khulu was doing but she felt the rucksack knocking against her knuckles as Olly worked at the buckles, and the tin cup had banged her trainer as it fell. ‘Isn’t the toolset too small for him to wrap his trunk around.’

‘No. I’ve seen an elephant pick up a nut with its trunk before. *That’s it*, Khulu. Now, give it to Christopher.’ The cold casing of the Leatherman pressed against his palm ‘No, not me. Christopher. The big boy. He’s the strongest and the best with his hands. Give it to Christopher.’

Christopher watched the big shape rounding the tree. Khulu’s small brown eyes settled on him.

‘I’m Christopher,’ said Christopher. ‘Olly means me.’

Khulu slid the Leatherman into Christopher’s hand. He took a step backwards, and elephant and boy focused on the silver toolset in its leather pouch, the leather embossed in gold lettering with *Oliver Beyers*.

‘There’s a saw, Christopher,’ Olly was saying. ‘Find it and open it.’

It was fairly simple getting the toolset out of the pouch, using his bottom and the tree to secure the pouch while he slid out the toolset. But it was much much trickier to locate and draw out the small saw, with only the restricted movement of one hand. He cut his finger in the process and dropped the toolset three times. Each time Khulu picked it up, rumbled, and returned it to his hand. Christopher felt reassured by his patience. ‘*You can do this*,’ the elephant seemed to be saying ‘*I’m here to help you until you do. Concentrate and don’t give up.*’

At last he had the blade out. Back and forth, back and forth he carved at the rope fibres. They were all very silent as he did it, although the elephant's heavy breathing resonated in their ears, against the riotous evening birdsong.

*Plunk.* A fibre snapped. *Puh-lunk.* And another. The back and forth motion of the saw put pressure on the rope, and on Olly and Christopher's wrists where they shared a bond. Bright drops of blood stained the rope, and dropped onto the sandy soil at their feet.

The final strand gave. They shook their wrists free. After that it was easy to saw through the ropes binding their feet.

'Khulu – we did it!'

They wanted to throw their freed arms around him, and took a step towards him. But with the anxiety of being captive gone, they both remembered that, even though they were his friends, he was nevertheless a huge, wild elephant. They retreated back against the tree.

'Thank you, Khulu.'

The elephant dipped his head, turned in a slow circle and melted back into the bush.

'Emma!' They ran around the tree to help her out of her bonds.

'Emma?'

'I'm getting sick,' she said weakly.

They stared at her. Her face was very red, and slick with sweat. Her eyeballs had a yellowish stain and she was breathing in short, laboured gasps. She looked terrible. They slid her wrists and ankles out of the ropes and she ran to the bush and vomited.

Christopher had never seen her like this. Panic, which had just ebbed in him, welled up again.

'What's wrong?'

She staggered back and leant against the ironwood tree. Olly scrutinized her. He felt her hot forehead and looked at her yellow eyeballs.

'Were you very cold earlier, and now you're very hot?'

She nodded miserably.

'It's malaria.' He had seen people with malaria before. Even Tata had had malaria once, on another field trip. But they had been near a hospital that time, and Tata was an adult. 'You're at the fever stage. You need to get your fever down. Have you been taking the pills?'

'No,' whispered Emma shame-facedly. 'I didn't want to at first 'cos I didn't like the taste and I was cross. And then I wasn't cross and I did start taking them.' Her yellow eyes glowed in contrition, 'I must have got bitten when I wasn't taking them.'

'Emma,' yelled Christopher 'Are you *mad*?'

'It doesn't matter.' Olly was glancing around the clearing, and up at the darkening sky. 'I think I can help her. But it's going to be night in half an hour. We have to get sorted first before we can't see anything.'

*Find a high area! Stay away from animal paths! Make a fire!* Phineas's three golden rules for an unplanned night in the bush.

'Olly, when Ambrose Wilson was telling Reckson what to do, he said there was a sycamore up there past the bend and some big boulders next to the sycamore'. Christopher scrunched his eyes and peered upstream. He could just about make out the bend in the half-light. 'Let's go there.'

Olly nodded. They took Emma's weight between them by draping one of her arms over each of their shoulders and hoisted her along the uneven ground, stopping twice so that she could be sick again. As they cleared the bend they saw that Ambrose Wilson had been right. The stream arced down through the bush, flowing into a shallow pool before resuming its course. On their side of the bank grew a huge sycamore fig, its overhanging roots forming a small cave. Rising above the sycamore, were several large granite boulders. One of them was steep-faced but with a flattish surface on top. A euphorbia tree had somehow found a foothold in a crevice and clung precariously to the rock face.

'There – that'll do,' said Olly, pointing to the boulder with the euphorbia. Panting, they hauled Emma up. She crawled into a foetal position on the cooling stone, clutching her stomach while Olly and Christopher searched the brush below the boulder, gathering up armfuls of tinder and fallen branches.

They came back with the firewood. Olly built a small pyramid of kindling and twigs. He opened his survival pack, found his matches and lit the kindling. A flame leapt up. Christopher watched the younger boy lay one of the bigger branches near to the flames, where it could begin to dry and smoke. Olly found the candle in his survival pack, softened its wax base in the fire and pressed the wet wax to the rock. The little circle of light instantly created was immensely reassuring. The night seemed to recede at once.

Olly reached into his survival pack again and found his First Aid kit. He took out the antiseptic wipes and bandages.

‘Christopher, give me your arms.’

‘What about Emma?’

‘I’ll get to her, but we’re both still bleeding a bit and I don’t want the animals to smell it.’

Christopher winced as the alcohol on the wipes bit into his torn flesh. Olly wiped his own chafed wrists too. He bandaged Christopher’s arms and held his own arms out for Christopher to bandage. Every now and then he turned to Emma and made some cheerful remark, unrelated to the fact that they were stuck in the raw bush and she was fast coming down with malaria.

Observing Olly’s calm, methodical efficiency, Christopher honestly didn’t know how he had ever thought Oliver Beyers was pathetic. Olly Beyers was the opposite of pathetic. At this moment, Christopher felt like everything in the world depended on letting Olly Beyers figure things out.

In the puddle of light cast by the candle and the fire, Christopher watched Olly reach into the rucksack again. Olly extricated a small jar. He held the jar in his hands for some moments, his eyes closed.

‘Chris, I have to go. I’ll be back in a moment. Keep talking to Emma.’

*Don’t go, Olly* – Christopher wanted to howl but he nodded. Olly slid down the rock on his bottom. Christopher leaned over the boulder edge, his eyes locked on the bobbing play of Olly’s flashlight over the ground. The savage grunts sounded again, loud and distinct in the night air. Christopher shuddered and dived back into the firelight.



Scraping sounds came up the rock face – *claws?* – but it was only Olly back again, climbing with difficulty because he had the flashlight in one hand and a large stone in the other. Christopher watched him upend the glass jar. Something brown and woody-looking fell out.

‘Hold the torch, Chris.’

Olly pounded the woody, brown thing until a pool of fine powder had collected on the rock. Then, taking a mopane leaf out of his pocket, he transferred the powder carefully back into the jar. He licked his finger, touched the powder, tasted his finger, and pulled a face.

‘Emma?’

She wasn’t sleeping - she was too feverish to sleep - but she could barely talk.

‘*Nggggg,*’ she muttered.

‘Emma – I’m going to give you some medicine with some water to wash it down with. It tastes horrible but it’s really, really important that you swallow it all. Do you understand?’

‘*Nggggg.*’

‘All right. Help her sit up, Chris.’

Christopher put his hands under Emma’s armpits and lifted her up. Olly dipped the mopane leaf into the powder. He scooped up a leaf-full and held it out for her. She opened her mouth obediently and he tipped the powder onto her tongue.

‘*Yuk!*’ She squeezed her yellow eyes shut and gagged but she did manage to take a gulp from the water bottle he held out to her and swallow the mouthful, some water trickling down her chin. Olly made her open her mouth for another leaf-full of powder. He was about to screw the lid on the jar, when he hesitated and closed his eyes.

‘Again. Emma, you need one more mouthful. Open your mouth again.’

She looked a bit stricken but she did as he asked. When she had swallowed, Olly replaced the lid and put the jar back into the survival pack.

‘Get into the bivvy bag now, Emma.’

He shook the bag from its tube pocket and rolled it out on the rock. She crawled gratefully inside and he pulled the crackly, silver-blue fabric up around her shoulders.

She was soon asleep. As they watched her, her breathing slowly stilled into a steady rhythm. The sweat dried from her face, and the flush faded from her cheeks.

Christopher touched her forehead.

'She's quite cool! What did you give her, Olly?

'*Harpogophytum procumbens*. That's the Latin. Devil's Claw, in English. It's a desert plant.'

'Unbelievable! What does it do?'

'Reduces fever,' said Olly absently. He could see that much, at least. He had just been wondering himself exactly what magical ingredient in the root could exact such a transformation.

The moon appeared over the scrub on the far side of the stream. It was almost a full moon, and it hung fat, liquid and golden over the tree fringe. Olly felt inside his survival pack.

'Here, take this.' It was the space blanket. Christopher ripped it out of its square of plastic packaging and wrapped it around his shoulders and chest. It was quite marvelous how quickly it seized hold of his naked upper body warmth and hugged him in a warm air cushion of his own making.

'But what about you, Olly?'

'I've got my fleece and my rain poncho. And I've still got my tee shirt. I'll be fine.'

Both boys took off their trainers, to be more comfortable. They lay down next to Emma, and they chatted for a while about the space blanket and about other benefits that the Russian and American race to conquer space had given the world, such as freeze-dried food (Christopher didn't think he'd ever tried it but Olly assured him freeze-dried beef stew was absolutely delicious) and ear-thermometers (Abby had one of those by whose readings she set great store). That led them on to a discussion of the various lunar missions. Olly knew quite a lot about the lunar missions, particularly the Apollo missions, because of his passion for building model

spacecraft. Up on their boulder, with the moon floating so bright and luminous above them, it was thrilling to think of the great safari into the sky those early cosmonauts had braved. Anyway, it stopped them thinking about the lion grunts, which thankfully sounded much fainter and further away now.

They must have both fallen asleep because when they woke, the heavy moon had climbed right to the zenith of the sky and was beginning to drop down on the other side.

It was Emma who woke them.

'Olly? I'm really thirsty.'

He handed her the water bottle and touched her forehead. She wasn't as hot as she had been when they dragged her up the rock but she was warm again. Her fever was coming back.

The water bottle was empty. He clambered cautiously down the boulder and filled it at the stream, making a hole in the sandy bank and collecting the filtered water that dripped through the sand. It was an elephant technique, using sand to naturally clean water, but Phineas had showed them how to do it without trunks. He scrambled back up the boulder. Emma was already hotter. He dosed her with the last of the devil's claw and she lay back tiredly in her bivvy bag.

'Chris - we've got a problem. I gave her that first dose around seven o'clock and it's now about two o'clock, I guess.' He glanced up at the moon. None of them had wristwatches on because they'd taken them off for swimming and hadn't bothered to strap them back on again. 'The effects of the devil's claw only last about six hours. And I haven't got any more.' He showed Chris the empty jar.

'But it'll be morning in a few hours. They'll be looking for us. We can go and wait at the gravel road, and they'll find us.'

'They won't be looking for us here. They'll all be up near the Engelhard dam, where he was going to put your shirt. I bet there won't even be any tourists near here because everyone will be joining in the search. And I don't want to risk using the flares. The chance is too great that Ambrose Wilson and Reckson will notice them before any one else does. Then they'll come back and finish us up for sure.'

They stared at each other.

'The lions have gone,' said Olly 'I haven't heard them for ages. I'm going to walk back to the camp. I'm going to walk and tell them where she is.'

A faint voice from the bivvy bag said:

'It's the S46 road.'

They both twisted to look at her.

'The S46 road,' she repeated. 'Where we left the gravel, that was the S46 road. So if you get back to the gravel, and you turn left you're heading in the direction of the camp. I don't know how far 'cos I don't know where we turned off. But eventually you'll get to another gravel road and that's the S94 and then you turn right and it's only two kilometers to the tar road. But that's just outside the camp gates. I made some mental notes while we were hiding in the jeep.'

'You made mental notes while you were coming down with malaria?' Emma always blew Christopher's mind a bit but now she was blowing it big-time.

'Yes. No – I just realized that we were only on the tar for a minute so we must have turned onto the S94. Because the other gravel roads are further away and we would have been on the tar for longer. I know the roads quite well,' she added unnecessarily, 'because I've been following our routes in my Visitor's Guide. They are all very clearly marked.'

'Great,' said Olly heartily. 'That makes things much easier.' He took a deep breath and stood up.

'Sit down, Olly' said Christopher. He stood up himself in his space-blanket casing. The space-blanket bulked him up and the falling moon threw a long moon-shadow across the boulder so that for a moment, he seemed much bigger and older than his eleven years. 'You aren't going to fetch help. I am.'

## CHRISTOPHER GOES FOR A WALK

The two boys met eyes.

‘I’m happy to go, Chris,’ said Olly. ‘I don’t mind. I’ve been in the bush quite a lot, and this is your first time.’

‘No way, Olly. The lions might have moved on but what about the hyenas? They’re all over the place. Remember what Phineas said? They wouldn’t touch a big guy like me. They might be curious but they wouldn’t see me as food. You, on the other hand ...’

Christopher knelt down to put on his trainers. He snapped the Velcro fasteners into place.

‘Anyway, it’s better you stay with Emma. You’re the one who had the right medicine, and who knew what to do. You can help her better.’

Olly went to the survival pack. He handed Christopher the roll of boiled sweets, the torch and his water bottle.

‘Won’t you need them?’

‘No, I’ve got my mug to collect water. I wouldn’t keep the torch on anyway. It’s bad bush practise. The light attracts insects, and insects attract frogs, and frogs attract snakes. It’s better just to have firelight. Here.’ with the Leatherman he cut a strip from the bottom of his faded blue t-shirt. ‘When you hit the gravel road, tie this to a tree so you can find us again.’

Christopher pocketed the strip and stood. He walked to the edge of the rock. He looked back over his shoulder.

‘We’re all gonna be fine. We’re Bundu Bashers, remember? Like your dad said, Olly. We’re three Bundu Bashers together.’

And with that he dipped the other side of the boulder and was gone.

Between the light from the waxing moon and the gleam of the torch it was surprisingly easy for Christopher to pick his way through the bush. The path they had come in on was very rough indeed but Ambrose Wilson and his jeep had helped matters considerably by cutting a wide swathe through the overhead branches as

they had mown their way in. Christopher just had to follow the branches swinging at crazy angles above his head, or littering the ground. The only really hairy moment happened when Christopher tripped over a tree root and fell sprawling. When he got to his feet, he couldn't work out which direction he had been facing originally, and the moon was temporarily hidden by cloud. For a moment he felt blind panic because, while he could still make out the faint track at his feet, the mopane thicket in both directions looked identical and he didn't know which way to head. Luckily, he remembered something Phineas had taught them on their very first expedition with him. Lichen always grows on the southern side of the tree. He could make out plenty of lichen in the gleam of his torchlight and he knew that if they were more or less where Emma thought they were, then the gravel road he was heading towards ran north to south and the track he was on ran east to west. He rubbed his grazed hand over a patch of lichen and forced himself to concentrate. If that was south, and he was supposed to be heading east he needed to turn to the right, not the left. And he needed to be much more careful where he put his feet. If he sprained his ankle, they were all sunk. This degree of caution took a great deal of concentration and left little time to think of anything else so he was almost disconcerted, about forty-five minutes later, when he suddenly found himself standing on the open gravel road.

He tied the blue strip to a tree where it was clearly visible from the road. He looked around uneasily. It was a very bright night and the road was broad and treeless. He himself would also be plainly visible to any watching pairs of eyes. But there was nothing to be done. He puffed his chest, cleared his throat, turned left and struck out for the camp.

He passed a small herd of impalas. Most of them were sleeping on all fours but he could see they had appointed a few look-out impalas to alert the herd to the presence of predators. The look-outs stood very still as Christopher walked by them, large ears pricked and dark, nervous eyes glued to him.

Every now and then a springhare, bounding over the road on its powerfully built hindlegs, would see Christopher and freeze in astonishment, bushy black-tipped tail snaking behind it, tiny clawed forelegs tucked against its chest. He saw

fluffy scrub hares too and a spotty long-legged bird that Jack Beyers had once pointed out to him, and called a thick-knee dikkop. After he had been walking along the gravel road for what seemed a long time, he shone his torch up into the branches of knob thorn tree. A pair of large yellow eyes gleamed back at him, and the torch picked out a spotted pelt. His heart flew into his mouth. Leopard? But it was too small for a leopard. A little pointed snout and banded tail showed clearly in the torchlight. Christopher gushed a sigh of relief. He'd seen a picture of what he was looking at in the common mammals section of the Visitor's Guide. It was a small-spotted genet. They ate frogs and birds but they didn't present a problem to boys.

He could smell water now. He tried to conjure up a memory of the map in the Visitor's Guide. He was probably on the near side of the Engelhard dam, where the road ran very close to the banks. Ambrose Wilson would have led the search party to the far side. He could actually smell the flat, muddy stink of the hippos in the dam and he knew if he could smell them, with their keen noses they could certainly smell him. He very much hoped that they were too wrapped up with their night-grazing and other hippo doings to bother with him.

The stars were becoming less distinct and the blackness of the night tinged with blue. As he walked on tiny hints of pink pricked the horizon. *Chee-chakla. Chee-chakla.* The francolins – the bush wake-up alarms - were calling. The sun surged out of the east and the sky began to bloody.

And then up ahead he saw the stone road-marker. He had reached the point where the S46 met the S94. 'Letaba 2 kilometres,' announced the road-marker. Christopher quickened his pace, heartened. Two kilometres was nothing. He could walk two kilometres with his feet chopped off.

He was turning the corner onto the S94 when he saw them. Beyond the road-marker was a meadow and in the meadow were big grey shapes. Lots of them. He hadn't seen them immediately because they were so silent, and the rising sun was at his back so the field in front of him was still very dark.

Not even a hundred yards from where he stood was a big adult elephant with one short tusk and one long tusk. Next to her was another large adult with very long tusks that curved towards each other so that the tusks crossed in front of her. The

crossed-tusk adult had a small baby beside her. Christopher recognized them at once as the matriarchs who had come together in the joyful greeting ceremony on the banks of the Letaba river. He had stumbled across the Matilda-Iona bond-group.

He shrank back against a leadwood tree growing at the side of the road, his muscles quivering with tension, desperately hoping he was downwind of the elephants. He didn't dare move. But after a minute or two, he realized that it wasn't just him. He could sense tension in the elephants themselves. Something was going on. Then he saw that Matilda and Iona were squaring off against two young bulls, one a little taller than the other but the shorter bull more heavysset. All four elephants stood with their heads held high and their ears spread.

Matilda lifted her head even higher and flapped her ears. Then she folded them horizontally and lunged at the taller of the bulls, jabbing him in the backside with her tusk. He sprinted a few yards away with a groaning bellow. The heavier bull also moved away. Matilda and Iona flapped their ears, rumbled and started to feed. But Christopher could see they were both still watching to see what the bulls would do.

The taller of the bulls swung his right foot back and forth and back and forth. He took a few steps forward to where there was a little patch of dust, picked up some dust with his trunk and threw it over his back. Christopher could see he was trying to work out what to do. Then he seemed to make a decision. He lifted and spread his ears, flapped them against his neck and shoulders, let them slide down with a rasping sound and moved in close to the herd again. The heavier bull gave a sharp toss of his head. His ears cracked in the still dawn like canvas sails. He too moved towards the herd.

Matilda folded her ears. She started walking rapidly towards the bulls. They edged away from her, rumbling, and the heavier bull gave a short trumpet of alarm. Now Iona joined Matilda. She swung aggressively towards the bulls and tossed her trunk at them. The heavier bull groaned and moved away from her. She tossed her trunk once more. He groaned again and ran off a few yards, bringing him to the edge of the road. Matilda was still walking towards the taller bull. She shook her head sharply. The taller bull also ran away. They hovered for a moment at the



road's edge, so close to Christopher that he could smell them. The taller bull's confused eye rested on him and Christopher's stomach clenched in fear. But the bull wasn't interested in him. He swung away. Both bulls began to walk slowly away from Christopher, and from the herd.

Matilda called out to the herd. She turned to face the west. When the other elephants heard her rumbling they changed their positions so they all faced the west. They started to walk slowly across the field with their backs to Christopher. Matilda's little calf hooked his trunk around her hind leg. She stretched her leg forward and he came up under her to suckle. She let him suckle for a minute or two and then she resumed her march with the herd following. One by one they disappeared into the mopane scrub.

At that moment a spotted hyena trotted out from behind the road-marker. It was gazing after the elephant herd but when the last elephant vanished it turned towards the road, stopping short when it saw Christopher and lowering its head a little so that its sloping shoulders formed the highest point of its body. Whilst Christopher hadn't particularly wanted to run into the Matilda-Iona bond-group, he had also rather hoped not to meet a hyena. He'd grown fond of hyenas in the last couple of weeks, fond that is when Phineas and his rifle were around. Without Phineas, and alone in the bush, it was difficult not to dwell on what very large jaws hyenas had.

He pressed on towards the camp. The hyena followed him. Christopher glanced nervously over his shoulder. He couldn't begin to tell from the hyena's dark, glossy eyes what it had in mind but it didn't seem hungry. It seemed quite relaxed, and almost puppyish on its large forepaws. Just then it whooped, and laughed its uncanny hyena cackle.

Christopher swallowed but he tried to inject confidence into his stride, stretching as tall as he could in his trainers. He wasn't some little titchy kid, was he? He was on his way to being twelve, after all. He was going to be twelve in October so he was more than half-way done with being eleven. And he had only one term left at Finchley Central Primary and then he would go to secondary school, a thought that scared the bejesus out of him whenever he let it enter his mind. Anyway, he was too

big and too old to be afraid of hyenas. It was only a kind of dog anyway. He'd always wanted a dog.

He glanced back at it again. It was still lolloping after him. And then he realized. The hyena didn't want to eat him. It just wanted to gawp at him. It was fascinated. Boys in space blankets didn't pass through here regularly at dawn.

'You can hang out with me if you want' he called out, unwrapping one of Olly's boiled sweets and popping it into his mouth 'but you better split when we get back to camp.'

The hyena giggled.

'What's your name? You gonna introduce yourself? If you're planning to hang out with me, shouldn't you introduce yourself first? You aren't very polite.'

The hyena giggled again.

'Mr Giggle? That's what you call yourself? You sound like my sister and her dumb friends when they have a sleepover.'

He carried on in this vein and the hyena trotted along behind him. Christopher warmed to the animal. He decided to tell it all about the England line-up for the World Cup: the strengths and weaknesses of each player on the England side, his predicted outcomes for each match, and his reflections on whom the ultimate winner would be.

'Brazil's gonna win,' he was saying 'I'm *almost* completely sure. Jack thinks Germany but the Brazil team this year – you can see why the person who started calling football 'the beautiful game' was a Brazil player. They're just magic to watch. Honestly though, I hate to say it but I can't see England even making the finals. I *want* to be proud of our team but you gotta face facts when they're staring you in the face. If England doesn't ...'

The hyena refused to fact facts. It froze, then ran off into the bush. Christopher stared after it, disappointed. At that same moment he heard the thrust of an engine. He turned to peer up the road. He detected the soft aura of concealed headlights and then the engine sounds grew louder and a jeep crested the rise ahead of him, headlights blazing. Christopher shielded his eyes.

'CHRISTOPHER!' And there was his mother, exploding out of the jeep, running wildly over the gravel on her bare, soft British feet. Her swollen eyes were puffed almost shut. 'CHRISTOPHER! Oh my God, you're alright! Oh my baby!' She caught him up and almost knocked him over with her embrace. 'What are you wearing? Where are Emma and Olly? Why are you walking alone in the dark? Why have you got bandages on your arms?' Questions, accusations and sobs flew out of her mouth, all mixed together.

The jeep caught up with her. He saw Jack Beyers at the wheel, and Phineas behind him. He climbed into the vehicle with his mother still clinging to him and still jabbering hysterically.

'We've been looking for you all night! Ambrose Wilson found your shirt. How could you even think of leaving the camp without a guide? There's been a search party out for you but we looked and looked and after the shirt we couldn't find another trace. We were just going back to the camp to call in the helicopters for a daylight search from the air. But Phineas said he had a funny feeling you weren't far off so we drove down ... Where are Emma and Olly?'

'Mum, ssshh. Ambrose Wilson is a bad man. He's the one who killed the rhino, him and Reckson. They wanted to kill Khulu. And they tried to kill us too.'

'Ambrose Wilson? What are you talking about? He's been up all night looking for you. He's leading the search party right now.'

'No, he's just pretending. But it doesn't matter – we can sort him out later. I'll tell you about him on the way. We have to get to Emma right now. She's sick – she's got malaria. She hasn't been taking the pills.'

'WHAT?' screeched Abby.

'It's all right – *calm down*, Mum. Olly gave her some medicine to bring the fever down and it worked but he's run out now. That's why I walked back to find you. We have to get back to them at once.'

Jack revved up the jeep and they skidded off.

'The only thing Olly has in his first aid kit is paracetamol' said Jack grimly, 'It's good for a headache and a common fever but it's not a strong drug. I'm surprised it had any effect on a malarial fever at all'.

'It wasn't paracetamol' said Christopher. 'It was something else. Harpy ...'  
But Jack's foot was almost flat on the accelerator and the sound of Christopher's  
voice was drowned by the roar of the engine.

## THE AMULET

Emma and Olly watched Christopher dip behind the boulder. Olly went to sit on the edge of the rock. He watched the flashlight bob through the bushes until it disappeared from view.

‘Olly – I’m really thirsty again. Will you fetch me some more water?’

He climbed down to the stream with the enamel mug in his hand and crouched to fill it. As he hunkered there he felt an odd prickling sensation at his back. He whipped around, thinking of lions. But there was nothing behind him except the huge sycamore fig tree, with its great spreading roots making a little cave out of the sandbank.

He climbed back up the boulder, taking care not to spill any of the water. She drained the whole cup and quickly fell asleep again. He sat beside her but he knew he was not likely to sleep any more this night. Without Christopher, and Emma so weak and helpless, he felt a great sense of responsibility.

He sat for a long time, his mind playing over the various events of his life but most particularly the recent treasured days with Emma and Christopher. Every now and then he felt Emma’s forehead. The British school summer term was due to start on Monday. What would happen with Emma and Christopher once they returned to school in England? Would they go back to ignoring him? The idea filled him with dismay but a rustle in the bush brought his thoughts back to the present. The irony of his worrying about their return to Finchley almost made him laugh. However things stood on Monday between himself, Christopher and Emma, he would just be pleased to see Monday in the first place.

Daylight was coming. The sky softened and blued, then a rosy cast spread from the east. He lay down next to Emma. Her forehead was warm but not burning. He felt her pulse too although he didn’t know exactly how pulses were meant to feel. But the rhythm felt steady. With the warmth of the day rising, his eyelids grew heavy.

\*

*'You've done very well, Ndlovu.'*

*'I only did what you told me to, Sanna,' he says, tiredly.*

*'Yes but you listened. Many would not have listened.'*

*She is so pretty in her elfin way, with her playful lively brown eyes, her string of ostrich shell moons circling her forehead and the dainty leather apron she wears at her waist. The beginnings of breasts bud on her slender chest.*

*'How old are you, Sanna?'*

*'I am all ages. But I am also the age where a girl first thinks of becoming a woman. We don't keep the day of our births as you do.'*

*He looks past her at the dry pale-red sand, the clumps of hardy, sharp-edged grass, a knotted, twisting camelthorn tree, too sparse-leafed to throw much shade. He sighs.*

*'Where are you from? What are you? Why do you bother with me?'*

*'I keep with you,' she says simply 'Because I still have love.'*

*He says nothing. In the far distance he sees a lone elephant grazing, one forefoot kicking gently at a clump of tough grass.*

*'Will you not follow your destiny, Ndlovu?'*

*'I don't know, Sanna. It is so difficult. You don't know the place I live. It's nothing like here. I am already so different from everyone else.'*

*He adds defiantly:*

*'And why must it be me? I am so ordinary. I am not even good at anything.'*

*'You are not ordinary. You are chosen. And it is in you, from all your history, to help others. You must talk to Jack.'*

*'Yes, Nokhanyo said so. But I can't do it. It is what he hates.'*

*The young girl gazes at him in the way she has of being both playful and serious.*

*'I know it isn't easy, Ndlovu. When I was a girl, I too resisted. I became very ill before I accepted. And my little grand-daughter – she fought it 'til she died, and you lost her.'*

*Olly frowns. He misunderstands her, in her gentle clicking language. A young girl who speaks of having a grand-daughter.*

*Sanna says:*

*'Ndlovu, there is something for you. My people, who are your people, have left a gift for you. You can take it.'*

*He looks about him.*

*'Where?'*

*'Not here in the dreaming world. Where you are now, in the living world. You felt it call for you earlier.'*

\*

Olly woke up. Beside him, Emma slept on. He climbed down the rock and stood at the edge of the pool. A stream of bubbles rose to the surface and for a moment he detected the narrow, grey form of a barbel catfish. He felt again the prickling sensation at his back. He turned to look at the great sycamore fig. There was a low tug in his stomach. He sank to his knees, peering into the cave. He clapped his hands but heard no movement, no startled slither. He clapped again, and again there was silence but just to be sure he reached for a long stick lying nearby and poked it into the parts of the cave he could reach, preparing himself to leap backwards if necessary. The cave was an ideal nest for snakes but none seemed to have availed themselves of the opportunity. He threw the stick away and crawled between the thick buttresses of the roots. It was dark there – the day's first light lost. There was a strong mouldering odour of damp earth and tree root.

Olly felt again the pull in his stomach and he shuffled on his knees further into the cave. A sudden warmth in his hands. He let them have their own way and they slid over the back wall of the cave. For a moment they hesitated, and then he watched his fingers digging. A curved edge. Fragile and cool to his touch. He cleared the sand from it and wriggled backwards out of the cave.

It was an amulet. An ivory amulet, crafted in the ancient San style, small and oval, with a tiny carved hole. In the centre of the amulet stood the perfect etched figure of an elephant with great, curving tusks.

*'The tusk was from an animal that died at the end of its life. We never hunt this animal. This animal is like a person for us.'*

Olly looked up as the water in the pond rippled. The barbel had risen to an inch below the surface. He could just make out its long, slimy whiskers and little side fins.

'Olly? Olly, where've you gone?'

Emma's voice was panicked. He called back reassuringly - 'Just here, Em. I'm coming' - and thrust the amulet deep into his pocket.

She was sitting up in the bivvy bag.

'Where did you go? For water? You didn't take the cup.'

'For a pee. How are you feeling?'

'Not so bad. But I'm starving. Have we got anything to eat?'

The only thing that he'd had was the roll of boiled sweets but he'd given that to Christopher. He shook his head. But even as he did so two recent recollections surfaced: the whiskery catfish in the pond below, and a memory from the pages of his *Kruger National Park* book.

Would it work? The San people had done it, and the San people had lived and flourished right here in the park. His fingers closed on the amulet as he looked at the nearby euphorbia tree, that somehow sustained itself with its precarious perch on the rock crevice.

'I've got an idea.'

There was plenty of grass growing nearby although it was not as dry as it might have been because of the late summer rains. But he collected the driest handfuls he could find. He found some suitable rocks too. But how to tie the grass to the rocks? There were the remaining bandages in the First Aid kit but there was also his tee-shirt, already irreparable because of the strip he had cut off for Christopher.

He balanced the rocks, the grass bundles, the bandages and his tee-shirt on the boulder near the euphorbia tree. Then he cut into one of the thick, fleshy arms of the tree with his Leatherman. White milk started to drip out at once.

'What are you doing?' Emma was propped up on her forearms in the bivvy bag, watching him. He told her about reading about the San and their ancient fishing



methods in *The Kruger National Park*. She remembered the passage at once. Her eyes flashed with curiosity. He noticed they were less yellowish now.

‘Can I help?’

‘No – I’ve done everything. Now we just chuck the rocks in the pool, and then we wait, I guess.’

He carried the rocks down to the pool and slid them under the water, washing his hands carefully afterwards so that the euphorbia latex wouldn’t get into his eyes. He went back to sit on the rock.

‘Olly, something’s come to the surface!’

He went to see. Several drunken frogs floated on top of the water but in the middle of the frogs, twitching feebly, was the barbel. He waded into the knee-deep water and retrieved it. It revived a little as it felt his touch and gave a few spirited flicks of its tail. But he waded back out again and slammed it hard against the side of the boulder. That was the end of the story for the barbel but the beginning of breakfast for Olly and Emma. He carried it back up the boulder and laid it in front of Emma.

‘Your majesty.’ He made a bow with a twirly spiraling hand movement, like French aristocrats do in movies about French aristocrats.

She looked at the dead fish, wide-eyed.

‘How are you going to cook it? Don’t bits have to ... come out?’

But he wasn’t worried about any of that. Jack was a keen fisherman, and cooking fish without tin foil or a grill pan was something Olly had done with his father from time to time. He searched around the base of the boulder for a hard, flat non-porous stone. Stones with holes inside them weren’t any good for what he had in mind because they got too hot and blew up. After a while he found the ideal stone. He added a few more branches to the fire and settled the stone on the embers. Then he went back to the river to gut and clean the barbel. He finished the job next to the fire, slicing thin, glassy strips of flesh from the fish and laying them on the rock. They began to sizzle as soon as they touched the hot surface, lost their glassiness and turned white. As each strip was ready he lifted it from the hot stone,

laid it out on the rock face to cool and sprinkled it with the salt from his survival pack.

They were both very hungry because they had eaten nothing since noon the previous day and that had only been a measly peanut butter sandwich. But the fish would have been delicious anywhere. Here in their elevated rock restaurant with its view over the meandering river, it left them speechless as they chewed. Between them they worked their way through the whole barbel. Eventually Olly couldn't find a single further scrap of flesh clinging to the skeleton. He climbed down the rock to wash his hands, threw away the skeleton and fetched a mug of water for Emma, from upstream of the fishing pool.

'Thank you, Olly,' she said weakly. 'That was much nicer than a scorpion.'

The sun was properly risen now. It shone down on their heads.

'I wonder how Christopher is getting on,' said Emma. Olly was wondering just the same thing, but it wasn't helpful to wonder. All they could do was wait.

'Olly?'

'Yes?'

She climbed out of the bivvy bag. It was hot now anyway, and with the meal digesting she felt much better. She settled herself cross-legged beside him.

'What's going on with you?'

'Nothing,' he said guardedly.

She looked sideways at him.

'Olly – I want to know what's going on. How do you do it? How did you know that the snake was in the okapi's feed? How did you know the rhino horns were hidden at Masorini? How did you know Ambrose Wilson was leaving to kill Khulu? How did you happen to have the right medicine on you? How do you know these things?'

'I can't tell you.'

'That's not good enough any more!' He looked at her in surprise. There was anger in her voice.

'Olly, you know what? If Chris and I had to get our heads around you, you have to get your head around us as well. My mother loves your dad and your dad

loves my mum. They're together. So we're together too. You, me and Chris. We're Bundu Bashers, and we have to trust each other and we have to look out for each other. You've never had a brother or a sister but I've had one my whole life and trust me, that is how it works. You can't have secrets. You've got to be the other one's true friend and you've got to believe they'll always help you out, even if no-one else in your life will. Otherwise, what is the point?'

He looked down at his hands. She saw him swallow. He whispered.

'I have dreams.'

She nodded. He cleared his throat. He spoke a little louder.

'People come to me. Well, not people. There are two of them. They come and they tell me what to do.'

'But I see people in my dreams,' she said slowly 'and it's all rubbish. Bits of what's happened in my day and other dream-bits mixed up. It doesn't mean anything.'

'I have those kind of dreams too. But this is different. They're real. I mean – they seem real. And they know exactly what's going on in my life.'

And then he told everything. About Sanna and her almost-desert, about Nokhanyo and her cattle-covered hills, about how they came and came and came in dreams, with their instructions and their advice, even when he didn't want them. Well, almost everything, because he left out their constant urging about talking to his father and about following a path he didn't really understand. And he left out the amulet. He could feel it in his pocket as he spoke but the discovery of the ancient San carving was too fresh and raw to talk about.

When he had finished she was silent for a long time.

'Wow!' she said, eventually. She stared at him.

'Don't they scare you?'

'No, they're not scary. They're not scary at all. They're kind. They always seem to want to help me. But they are scary too because I know they are not really there. And I know this doesn't happen to other people.'

'Did you tell your Dad about it ever?'

'No! And you have to promise not to!'

'I promise,' she said. She slid her hand into his. 'But thank you for telling me.'

He shrugged but a shrug wasn't what he was feeling inside. He felt a profound, almost physical, sense of relief that he had spoken of his dreams to another human being and she had listened and heard him out. He closed his eyes and floated for a moment in the cosmic warmth of the morning sunshine, the nearby human warmth of Emma Bentley and the satisfaction of the fish breakfast he had been able to provide for her.

A horn blared loudly.

'GUYS GUYS! ARE YOU OKAY? I FOUND THEM! WE'RE HERE! ARE YOU OKAY?'

Christopher was standing up in the jeep, yelling for all he was worth. They saw Jack, Abby and Phineas too as the vehicle plunged towards them through the trees, branches snapping and cracking under its weight. They sprang up on the summit of the boulder, cheering and waving wildly at the oncoming rescue party.

## GOOD-BYE, KHULU

In the reception office at Letaba Jack sat on one of the benches, flanked by Christopher and Olly. Emma's red school satchel lay on the floor at Christopher's feet. On another bench four burly policemen from the South African Police Service jostled shoulders. Phineas was leaning against the counter, deep in conversation with Dr David Mabunda, the director of the Kruger National Park, who had just arrived after a hurried journey from his headquarters at the main camp at Skukuza in the south of the park.

'I've radioed Ambrose Wilson,' explained Dr Mabunda, 'I told him I want to oversee the search party myself and we are going to make plans for an extended air and ground rescue operation. He and Reckson are on their way back. Ambrose seemed very eager to help. He says he is starting to feel most worried about the children's chances of survival. He wants to leave no stone unturned.'

He inclined his head to Jack, Olly and Christopher, and raised his eyebrows.

'Of course, I didn't tell him that the only stones either of them are going to be looking at for years to come are the ones in the walls of Leeuwkop Prison in Johannesburg.'

Earlier, when the Bundu Bashers and their parents had returned to the camp, the First Aid ranger had examined Emma.

'She's over the worst of this bout of fever,' said the ranger 'but she's by no means out of the woods. She's still infected and she'll worsen soon without treatment. You must take her to the hospital in Tzaneen. They'll put her on a quinine drip.'

Abby and Jack decided that Abby should leave at once with Emma in the Renault van. Abby, Jack and Phineas now knew every detail of what Ambrose Wilson and Reckson had done and before Abby and Emma left, the children showed the adults where they had hidden the rhino horns. Phineas telephoned an outraged Dr Mabunda to report the situation.

As luck would have it, one of the other rangers had been invited to a party just the other side of Tzaneen that evening. He was planning to drive through in the mid-afternoon, and he said he could give Jack, Olly, Christopher and all the Beyers and Bentley luggage a lift to Motsumi Lodge, after they had packed their bags and struck camp.

Abby and Jack had conferred. Afterwards Jack said to Christopher.

'Chris, I need to stay here til later today because I've got to pack up both our tent and yours. But there is no reason for you to hang around if you would rather stay with your sister.'

'No way! Of course I'm staying! Are you kidding?' Christopher glanced at Emma wrapped in a blanket on Mum's lap and added hastily, 'I mean, I'm sure Emma's in excellent hands with Mum and the hospital staff at Tzaneen. She doesn't need me. I don't want to miss seeing Ambrose Wilson's face when he realizes we aren't dead.'

So now there was a little surprise party gathered in the reception office. They heard the sound of an engine and, through the reception windows, could see it was Ambrose Wilson's jeep. Ambrose Wilson and Reckson pulled into one of the parking bays. They got out of the jeep and walked towards the office. Jack stepped outside.

'Mr Beyers,' said Ambrose Wilson, his voice heavy with sadness, 'We've searched all night and I would search every night for the rest of my life if it could help you. We must hope and trust in Dr Mabunda's rescue plan. But, my friend, I have to be honest. Things are not looking good.'

'You are not my friend,' said Jack. Ambrose Wilson looked at him oddly. Jack moved aside to make way for Ambrose Wilson and Reckson to go through the office doorway. As they did so he added, 'And no, things are not looking good at all. For you.'

Reckson took one look at Christopher, Olly, Dr Mabunda, and the four uniformed policemen, and tried to make a run for it. Two policemen bolted after him and caught him before he was even across the parking lot. They hand-cuffed him, hauled him back into the office and sat him down on a bench between them.

Ambrose Wilson showed more presence of mind. His expression when he entered the room was a little bemused because of what Jack had just said. As he saw the children his broad pink sun-weathered face whitened with shock. His mouth fell open and his watery blue eyes bulged. They darted from one person to another as he attempted to recover himself.

'Thank God you're alive!' he boomed at last, unconvincingly. 'You've had us all so worried!'

'The game's up, Wilson' said Dr Mabunda. 'The children have told us everything.'

The big ranger's face hardened. They could see the slyness creep into it as he tried to assess the situation and how best to take advantage of it. His gaze settled on Christopher.

'Are you doing this because I caught you trying to steal money from my wallet, my boy? Is this all your idea?' He shook his head and appealed to Dr Mabunda, 'David, I'd better tell you what's really going on. This little imp looks like butter wouldn't melt in his mouth but he's actually a common thief. Yesterday, around lunchtime, I found him in my jeep going through the pockets of my jacket which I'd left in the jeep for five minutes while I ....'

'Dr Mabunda to you,' said Dr Mabunda. 'And I believe the children.'

'You're going to believe *them*. Young children? Everyone knows how children make things up. Why, when I was a boy I told the biggest whoppers. I ...'

'You still tell them, Ambrose', interrupted Christopher. He was normally a bit shy about speaking in front of a group of adults but he was so angry now he didn't care. 'I'm not a thief and a liar – you are! And a murderer!'

'He's lying,' Ambrose Wilson looked desperately at the other adults. 'They're all lying. Every last word of it. They've had it in for me ever since they arrived. It's all claptrap and make-believe and lies!'

'Perhaps,' said Dr Mabunda. 'But what do you have to say about these?'

He took Emma's satchel from Christopher, opened it and laid the rhino horns out on the counter. Ambrose Wilson's face went back to being open-mouthed and bulgy-eyed.

‘They overheard you tell Reckson where to bury the horns so that your contact outside the park could come and dig them up. But, unfortunately for you, and your rhino horn and ivory poaching ring, the kids dug them up first.’

Confusion reigned supreme on Ambrose Wilson’s plump features.

‘But ....’

‘Save your breath, Wilson’ said Dr Mabunda shortly. He nodded at the remaining two policemen who were not standing guard over Reckson. One of them had another pair of handcuffs dangling from his belt which he unsnapped now and held up.

‘There will be plenty of opportunity for you to give your side of the story,’ said Dr Mabunda. ‘You certainly have a lot of explaining to do. But the place to do it will be in a court of law.’

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‘Okay, boys, I’m all done. Time to get up.’

Christopher stumbled out to the waiting jeep. He hadn’t really woken up and he squeezed himself between two comfortably spongy bags and fell asleep instantly.

‘The back row is empty, Ol,’ said Jack, climbing in next to the ranger, ‘Why don’t you lie down and have a kip? I’ll wake you up to strap your safety belt when we get to the gates and the national road.’

Olly nodded, made his way to the back of the jeep and lay down. After Ambrose Wilson’s and Reckson’s arrest, Jack had told the boys to go and take a shower while he packed up the Beyers’ tent. When they were done showering he was finished with the tent. He told them to lie down and nap while he moved on to the Bentley’s tent. They didn’t think they would sleep and were planning to chat about the arrest and everything else that had happened. But the reality was that they were both exhausted from the last twenty four hours. When Jack arrived at the tent an hour and a half later with the ranger and the loaded jeep he had to shake them hard to rouse them from deep slumber.

Three-quarters asleep, Olly heard the familiar loud rapport as the jeep rattled over the iron cattle bars at the camp’s entrance. The jeep hummed along the tar road, lulling the tired boy.



He was about to let himself sink back into oblivion when he felt a presence. He sat up. The veldt ahead was empty of game: just the usual clusters of mopane with an occasional ironwood or apple-leaf tree. Olly felt a light pressure on the back of his neck. He twisted around in his seat.

Khulu was right out in the open, his great front legs actually on the tar. It was impossible that Jack and the ranger hadn't noticed him. But clearly they had not because they were chatting away, their eyes focused on the road ahead. And Christopher was asleep.

As Olly watched, Khulu swung his great head to look back into the bush behind him. A young bull appeared at the tree fringe, and then another. They ventured out into the open, crowding behind Khulu. In the way they bunched against his back legs, and in the tight, fearful fold of their ears, Olly saw they must have left their mothers and their birth herds only hours ago. Khulu reached out with his trunk to touch first the one, then the other. Olly heard faintly on the wind his low, encouraging rumble.

Khulu swung his head again to face the jeep. The massive bull elephant, lord of the bush and father to so many young and vulnerable bulls-in-the-making, lifted his trunk high. The sun glinted on his great, curving tusks, and the cloudless sky made a blue frame against which his magnificent form stood proud and distinct. He scented the air, and trumpeted.

'Elephant somewhere nearby,' said Jack to the ranger. But they didn't look behind them.

Olly blinked away tears. He raised his hand and waved back at Khulu. But his fist was closed because in his hand he held tightly clutched a San carving of a magnificent bull elephant, in the closing years of life.

'Good-bye, Khulu,' whispered Oliver Beyers.

## A DREAM AT MOTSUMI LODGE

Something was going on. Emma and Abby had arrived at Mostsumi Lodge around eight thirty in the morning. Emma had spent the night in hospital on a quinine drip with Abby on a cot bed next to her. But the doctors had given her the all-clear, and some follow-up medication to keep the malaria at bay, and she felt much better. Still weak, but definitely on the path back to health.

Jack, Christopher and Olly had spent the night at Motsumi Lodge, after the ranger had dropped them off. They had all shared Waterbuck Chalet. Jack produced playing cards and, both boys having slept during the afternoon, they weren't particularly sleepy at bed-time. Jack let them stay up, and they all played Snap, Sevens and Go Fish together. At ten, Lesedi, the night watchman at Motsumi Lodge, knocked on the chalet door to let them know he was going to shut down the electricity generator.

'Good', said Jack, yawning 'I don't know about you two but I was up the whole of last night in a search party, and then the whole of today sending criminals to prison and packing up tents. I don't think I've ever been so beat in my life.'

When Abby and Emma appeared at the chalet in the morning, they were all still asleep. That's when it got mysterious. Today was Friday and they were due to set off for Johannesburg on Saturday, in order to catch their England-bound flight on Saturday night in readiness for school and the summer term on Monday morning. When Jack had originally planned this trip, he had built in a day at Motsumi Lodge because an expert on crowned eagles lived in the nearby Magoebaskloof Mountains, and Jack wanted to have a chat with him. As it turned out, with everything that had happened in the last couple of days, the Bundu Bashers were pretty relieved to have nothing much to do for the day. As Jack rubbed sleep from his eyes, he announced that he was still planning to go and visit the crowned eagle expert but only in the afternoon. This morning he and Abbey had some errands to run. The Bundu Bashers could help themselves to cereal and milk and fruit from the left-over Letaba supplies, and could stay in the Lodge grounds and be good and not have any

adventures and not cause trouble. Lesedi was there to keep an eye on them, and Jack and Abby would be back in a couple of hours.

Jack and Abby went off in the Renault van. They got back just before noon, with some juice and cheese and bread and tomatoes for sandwiches, but also with a number of brown paper packages.

‘What are those?’ said Emma, eyeing the packages.

‘Just wait.’ said Abby. She and Jack were secreting the packages into Hippo Chalet. She handed Emma the grocery bag. ‘Go and wait in Waterbuck Chalet and make yourself some lunch. We’ll call you when we’re ready.’

Well, they had no idea what this was all about. They ate their cheese and tomato sandwiches hunkered on the steps of Waterbuck Chalet, scrutinizing the indistinct movements of their parents through the net curtains of Hippo Chalet and making speculations over what all this secrecy and intrigue might be about.

Abby poked her head out of the chalet door.

‘Ready!’

They brushed sandwich crumbs off their knees and ran across. The brown paper packages were arranged in three piles on the bed, with a scrap of paper sticky-taped to the top of each pile with handwriting on it. One scrap said ‘Olly’ and one said ‘Emma’ and one said ‘Chris.’

Jack cleared his throat.

‘We’ve got you some stuff that we thought you might want. I – we – Abby and I – we’re so darn proud of you three. We know this has been tough and you’ve had to put up with a lot of sudden changes because of what Abby and I wanted. But you’ve been so brave and so resourceful, and on top of everything else you saved Khulu. And God knows how many other animals that evil poaching ring would have slaughtered. I can’t tell you how proud we are of you.’

‘A lot proud,’ added Abby in her happy-but-wobbly voice. ‘You’ll find everything a touch of the baggy side. But you’re all growing so fast and we thought you could get at least a couple of years use out of everything.’

They tore into the packages.

‘Wild!’ yelled Christopher.

It was gear – bush gear. Proper, top-quality, strong, light, cool safari clothing. Each bundle contained:

### **BUSH CLOTHES FOR BUNDU BASHERS**

1. Two pairs khaki long-sleeved shirts (long sleeves for biting insects).
2. Two pairs zip-off safari trousers (so you can zip the legs on when it's cold and zip them off again when it's hot).
3. One wide-brimmed squashy canvas hat, with cord and toggle.
4. One long-sleeved khaki fleece (just because it's boiling at midday doesn't mean it won't be cold at night. 'It's better to be prepared', as Olly says.)
5. Four pairs of wool/ synthetic blend socks (because a wool blend dries more quickly and is more comfortable than straight wool. And cotton gets wet with sweat quickly and stays wet, causing blisters).
6. And best of all - one safari gilet with nine pockets: two chest pockets, two waist pockets, three security pockets (with zips), one large pocket on the back and one small slot pocket for pens (a gilet is a waistcoat that zips up in front. Great for when you need things to hand but you want your hands free. And you can never have too many pockets.)

'The only thing we couldn't find were the boots,' said Abby apologetically. 'They had some in the outdoor shop but not in your sizes. Perhaps back in London ...'

They assured her that their new bush clobber was *fantastic*, even without boots. They got changed into the new clothes at once. The wardrobe door in Hippo Chalet had a long mirror on the inside, and they propped the door open with a chair and took turns admiring themselves. And then Christopher and Olly ran round and round the Motsumi Lodge compound, with Emma hobbling along behind them. They whooped and yelled, chasing each other through the mango plantation, leaping over the flowerbeds and pebble borders, and scaring the wits out of the poor goats.

Jack went off to see the crowned eagle man. The Bundu Bashers and Abby spent a lazy afternoon reading and inventing card games. When Jack got back it was supper time. He drove them to a steakhouse in Tzaneen called the Misty River Spur.

They wolfed down burgers and chips and delicious battered onion rings and hot fudge sundaes. It was heavenly after all the simple camp food they had been having for the last fortnight.

Back at Motsumi Lodge, Jack and Olly retired to Hippo Chalet and Emma, Christopher and Abby settled into Waterbuck Chalet. Snuggling down in his animal print duvet, Christopher's thoughts roamed back to the first night he had spent at the Lodge, two weeks ago. It felt like two years ago. Everything that had happened, all the things he knew now that he hadn't known then. And he had amazing clothes too, ready and waiting for the next time Jack Beyers got interested in a bird. All three children, lying in their three single beds in the two chalets, were very aware that it was their last night in Africa. The repetitive chirping of the crickets and soft churring of night jars would all too soon be replaced by the whine of police sirens, the distant but ceaseless roar of traffic on the North Circular Road, and the belligerent tootings of the backed-up drivers on Ballard's Lane. Olly turned over on his stomach, pulling the duvet more tightly around his shoulders.

\*

*Wind.*

*Hot gusts of wind. They chase eddies of sand over the desert surface. A full golden moon rises and night falls. He sees grass huts, and in the middle of the huts are people, perhaps a dozen of them, clustered around a fire. The people are going to dance. Such slender little people, as he himself is little. Pale-brown, almond-eyed, high-cheekboned. He is with them but also not with them. Some rise from their places at the fire and strap shell-decorated anklets to their legs. As the people at the fireside clap and sing in rhythm, the dancers circle them, stamping their anklets in time to the rhythm. They hold sticks which they shake before them. There is an old man at the head of the column of dancers. The golden moon continues to rise as they dance, and the fire leaps and crackles. The old man sweats, trembles, convulses, staggers and falls. There is pain in his face. Geometric patterns appear and fly around his head. His face becomes at once his own and that of a kudu. He pants and snorts, his arms outstretched before him. The people dance and clap.*

*White men with rifles. Big, blonde-haired, bushy-bearded. Cold eyes. Trousers, jackets, buttoned waistcoats, broad-brimmed hats. Leather bullet-holders over their shoulders. Stalking through mountains, searching valleys and caves. Because their bullets are for the little people.*

*Black men in huge flat-bed trucks. They have herded the little people onto the trucks. The little people hold tin plates, blankets, scraps of food. The black men move between the abandoned grass huts, setting fire to them. The fire smoulders and stains the sky.*

*Olly feels it, deep within him – the terrible suffering of the little people at the hands of everyone who has come into their world.*

\*

*Tata's voice. 'All right, Olly. All right. It's just a fit. But I'm right here. Just breathe, Olly. Keep breathing. It's all right. I'm right here. Just relax.'*

\*

*How beautiful are the cattle. The glossy black, brown and white patchworks of their hides, their broad, stern faces, the wide curve of their horns. The herd boys run after them. Sometimes they stop to steal honey from bees' nests in tree hollows, or to swim in the black-water rivers. Their villages crest ridges in the hill-country of their home. Here too there is dancing. It is the young girls, nine of them, in a three-by-three formation. They dance first on one foot, then the other. Clap clap clap. They shake their hips and lift their knees high, this way, that way. They wear short, white leather skirts, fringed with beadwork and orange vests. The herd-boys watch them. One day they will be men, and they will marry the dancing girls.*

*But a white man has come. He writes names in a book. He has train-tickets. The herd-boys are going to the gold-mines. Olly sees the mine. There is a huge structure at the top of the mine shaft, that makes the lift go up and down. Olly watches the almost-men file into the mine lift. They wear overalls and hard-hats with lights on their hats. The lift starts to sink. Down down down. All around the sound of drilling, of dripping water. The lift shudders with a blast. The whites of the men's eyes glisten in the gloom. Who will marry the dancing girls?*

\*

'Olly, enough. Olly can you hear me? Olly, please! Enough now.'

\*

*A farmhouse. Simply built, single story. Brown stone walls, a red corrugated iron roof with chimneys and a big barrel to collect rainwater. An L-shaped veranda at the front of the house, where trim green lawns slope down to a small curving bay and a white beach. The bay nestles amongst hills. There are hills on either side of the beach and hills behind the farmhouse. On the farmhouse veranda a woman in a plain green dress and matching headscarf sits drinking tea. Wisps of hair escape from her scarf, blonde touched with grey. A boy runs past her. He is perhaps eight or nine years old. Lithe, close-cropped fair hair, freckled nose. He wears only shorts and his naked legs and chest are sun-browned. He chases the wire inner rim of a car wheel, beating it over the mown lawns. He rounds the corner of the farmhouse. Women are washing there: a large tin bucket of soapy water, another of fresh water, a washboard lying on the grass. There is a little girl nearby: skin the colour of milky coffee, wiry hair tight-curved, a pretty heart-shaped face, high-boned cheeks. Younger than the boy, just a toddler. The boy thrashes the wheel so that it spins fast towards the bucket, collides, falls over. The little girl holds up her hands in delight, the boy laughs, the washer-women chide.*

\*

'Olly, stop this now. It's been fifteen minutes. You have to pull yourself out of this. Olly, can you hear me? Snap out of it. This is too long now. Olly, snap out of it.'

\*

*They are grown now, the boy and the girl, the boy grown into Tata and the girl into the mother Olly recognizes only from photographs. They dance, western-style, holding each other close, on a plank floor, silhouetted in front of a huge window. Her eyes are closed on his shoulder. He strokes her close-shaven head and whispers in her ear, and she smiles. He strokes her arm and the soft curve of her pregnant belly, so full against her slender body. Beyond the window, rises a great flat-topped mountain with a drifting tablecloth of cloud. A silver quarter-moon glints on the cloud.*

\*

'Olly – you're scaring the crap out of me. OLLY! Go into your sleep. You always going into your sleep. OLLY! I don't know what to do. I'm calling Abby.'

\*

*Olly sees the farmhouse again but now he is looking down at it, with the blue sea beyond its brown stone shape. He is in the hills above the house, at the foot of a tall tree with spreading branches and vivid bursts of red, red blossom. At the foot of the tree kneels the man who chased the wheel rim, who danced with the girl before the window as the moon touched the cloud. Tata weeps.*

\*

'OLLY, I'M BEGGING YOU! STOP THIS, OLLY. OH GOD, ABBY. LOOK AT HIM! WE'VE GOT TO GET HIM TO HOSPITAL.'

\*

*They are beside him now, the ones who walk with him. The young girl of the half-desert, the old woman of the hills. He called for them and they have come.*

*'Am I dying?' he asks.*

*'No Ndlovu – you live,' says Sanna.*

*Nokhanyo adds: 'The things you have seen, these are the things that make you as you are.'*

*He looks from one to the other.*

*'But what must I do?'*

*Sanna says: 'You must ask your father to call the One of the Light. '*

*And Nokhanyo says: 'The One of the Light, he will test you.'*

*And there rises before him, an image of the One of the Light.*

*A great wind. It comes from nowhere, howling through the mango plantation, sucking up a thick spiral of dust. It blasts its full force against the rondavel wall. A window flies open and the dust hovers for a moment over the convulsing boy before scattering across the linoleum floor.*

\*

'Tata?'



'OLLY! You're back!' Olly felt a tight trembling grip on his shoulder and Jack's face loomed into vision. 'Oh Olly, thank God. I've been scared out of my wits. You've been in a seizure for forty-five minutes.'

'Tata, call Lesedi.'

He felt the refusal in the touch on his shoulder before his father spoke.

'Olly, you don't need the night watchman. You need to go to hospital, at once. Abby's gone to back the van up to the doorway. She's coming with us so I can deal with you if you have another fit. I'll tell Lesedi to explain to Emma and Christopher where we are when they wake up.'

'I'm not going anywhere, Tata. Tell Abby to come back. I want her here. But most of all I want Lesedi. Call Lesedi.'

'Olly...'

'Call Lesedi, Tata.'

Jack went out of the room. He came back with Abby and the night watchman. Olly struggled up on the pillows.

'Lesedi?'

The old man knelt beside his bed. Olly's eyes moved over his face, his creased brown skin and milky, sightless eye.

'Lesedi – what does your name mean?'

'It means the light. In seSotho.'

Olly nodded. He looked up at his father.

'Tata, who is Sanna? Who is Nokhanyo?'

Jack gasped. The blood drained from his already fright-pale face. He didn't answer.

'Tata?'

'They are ... Olly, this is something you must have remembered from your earliest memories. But they are nothing. Nothing to bother you. You don't need ...'

'Who are they, Tata?'

Jack hesitated. Eventually he said:

'Sanna – she was a San woman, a trance dance healer from the Kalahari. And Nokhanyo, she was a Xhosa sangoma from the Xhosa people in the Wild Coast in South Africa.'

'But Tata,' Olly held his father's gaze, reaching as deep as he dared for the things he needed to know. 'Who are they to me?'

Jack turned his head from Olly. Perhaps he was looking for an answer from Abby but she only stared back at him, bewildered. Jack groaned, loud enough to hear. He backed a few yards away from Olly, and his answer when it came seemed torn from his body.

'They were your great-grandmothers, Oliver. Your great-grandmothers on your mother's side.'

The room was very silent for a moment.

'Lesedi?'

'Yes?' The old man was still kneeling at his bedside.

'They want you to help me.'

'How must I help you?'

'They want you to test me.'

Lesedi stood up and left the room. Jack groaned again. He sunk onto his own bed.

'No, no, Olly,' he muttered but he didn't look directly at the boy. Abby's eyes, moving between father and son, held fear and confusion. Several minutes passed in which none of them spoke to each other. Then Lesedi was back. He carried a reed mat under his arm. In one hand he held a bundle of pale-silvery stalks with small, yellow flowers and in the other, a metal plate and a dark cloth pouch. Olly saw that, around his lined forehead, he now wore a crown of bright glass beads. More beads circled his neck and hung in strands down his chest. Olly understood. The old man had two jobs. His official job was as night watchman at Motsumi Lodge. But he was also a sangoma – a traditional healer and medicine man.

'Abby,' said Lesedi, 'Go and sit there on the chair against the wall.'

She did as he asked. Lesedi went to the other side of the room. He knelt down and arranged the stalks in the metal plate.

'We call this plant *imphepho*. We always burn it before we talk to the spirits to clear the thoughts from our head.' He looked up. 'Jack, take the boy from his bed.' He pointed. 'Bring him there to the floor.'

Jack lifted Olly out of the bed. He wrapped him in a blanket and settled down on the floor, holding Olly close to him on his lap.

Lesedi sparked a match to the stalks and flowers in the tin plate. The bundle started to smoke and a strong, yeasty aroma sweetened the air.

The old man rose and crossed the dust-strewn linoleum floor, his movements as silent and graceful as a kudu, despite his advancing years. He unrolled the reed mat and knelt at its head. He emptied the contents of the pouch onto the mat. Round white bones, perhaps eight or ten, a feather, a porcupine quill, a sea-smoothed fragment of glass, the king from a chess set. And a large land snail shell, conch-shaped and tortoise-shell coloured.

His gnarled old hands gathered and cupped this odd collection. He dipped his head and caressed the objects with the deep, gentle sounds of his language. His words stopped. He extended his hands and threw.

The bones, the quill, the feather, the glass and the chess piece scattered and settled in front of him. But the land snail shell spiralled away in a wide arc, coming to rest at last just where Olly's bony child's feet touched the floor. He threw again, and again the shell rolled out, arced and came up short just between Olly's feet. And again, and this time the tip of the shell remained upright at the end of its journey over the dusty linoleum surface, propped lightly against one small instep.

Lesedi looked at the pair in front of him: Jack with his tight, anxious mask of concern; Olly held clutched in his lap, wrapped in a fluffy, mustard-coloured blanket except where his bare feet spilled to the floor.

His gaze rested on the boy, his one good eye shining brightly.

'You are a sangoma, Oliver Beyers. You need to go and train.'

Olly stared at the old medicine man. For a moment he experienced a deep, still quietness in himself. The quietness broke with sounds of anguish. He felt his body shudder. But it was not his own shuddering. His father was weeping.

'I am so sorry, Olly. I am so sorry.'

Olly climbed off Jack's lap and knelt beside him.

'Tata?'

'I am so sorry. I never meant to hurt you. I never meant to confuse you. I thought I was right.'

'You?' said the boy, amazed. 'What have you done?'

'Everything!' wept Jack, 'Everything that was wrong for you. It was all me.'

'But Tata! You've never done anything but love me and take care of me.

Tata!' He put his hands on his father's knees. It was unbearable to see Tata like this.

Lesedi was collecting up the bones and feather and quill, the shell and the other fragments from his pouch. He put everything away and then he went to the sink. He poured a glass of water for Olly and another for Jack. Then he sat down on Jack's bed.

'Jack?'

Jack looked up, tearfully.

'You must tell the boy,' said the old diviner 'Tell the boy everything, from the very beginning of what matters.

## THE VERY BEGINNING OF WHAT MATTERS: JACK'S STORY



Jack Beyers sat back on his heels. His eyes moved over the names he had inscribed in the dust in front of him.

'In the beginning, no-one called me Jack,' he said slowly. 'That came later. They called me Jacobus. Little Jacobus because my father was also Jacobus. I was his first son. His only son. His only child, in fact. I was a farm boy, an Afrikaner boy. Jacobus Beyers.'

Until I was nine years old I lived in the most beautiful place in the world. We were farmers, and our farm was on the Wild Coast where the Xhosa people live, on the southern coast of South Africa. Olly, that farm, it was so beautiful. All the Wild Coast is hills, and the hills run on and on until they run right down to the sea. Where our farm was, we were in a green nest of hills. When you stood behind the farmhouse you could see all the hills in every direction, rolling away from you with

the villages at the top and the cattle grazing everywhere. But if you stood in front of the farmhouse, there was the vast Indian Ocean, stretching on forever.

There was plenty of water in the hills, and the farm was full of birdlife. Grey-crowned cranes, wattled cranes, Cape vultures and Egyptian vultures, cuckoos and weavers, doves, teals, ducks – everything, they were all on our farm. One time a man who drew pictures of birds to put on stamps even came and stayed with us to make his drawings, because we had so many birds. That was where my love of birds began.

But there was something else that made the farm unique. This amazing wonderful thing that happened every year. The whole area was called Ngema Hills and our farm was called Ngema Bay Farm. *Ngema* is a Xhosa word. In English, it means whale.

Every year, from July to October, the bay would be full of whales. The whales spend the southern hemisphere summer in Antarctica, feeding, but when the Antarctic seas start to ice over they migrate to warmer climes to birth their calves. Our bay was a favourite with them because the water was so warm and sheltered. The bay would teem with whales and their little ones. Whales are so huge but they are also very playful. When they came, I used to watch them for hours and hours as they rolled and breached in the water.

I was a happy boy. I never went to school when I was on that farm because the whole country lived under a system called Apartheid, and there wasn't a school for white children close enough. I've spoken to you a bit about Apartheid, Olly – what it meant, that blacks and whites must never mix together, never go to school or church together, never marry or have children together. And the whites must be the masters and the blacks must listen to them. So because of Apartheid I couldn't go to the local school. My mother – Henrietta Beyers - she taught me at home. But a lot of the time I just ran around the hills and the beaches with the children from the villages, or by myself with a pair of binoculars, watching the birds and the whales. I had a great deal of freedom. My father made me do my chores and my mother made me do my lessons but when I was done with those I was as free as a bird.

In those days in South Africa if you were white, the person who looked after you, especially when you were very small, who fed you and bathed you and dressed you and so on, wasn't your mother so much. It was your nanny. My nanny was Nokhanyo.'

'Nokhanyo!' interrupted Olly. 'My Nokhanyo? She was your nanny?'

Jack nodded. 'Yes. Nokhanyo. She was also your mother Nickelwa's grandmother. And your great grandmother. But before she was either of those things, she was my nanny. And she was the best nanny in the world. When I was a baby and a toddler she used to tie me to her back in a blanket and wherever she went, I went. Even later, I followed her everywhere – up and down the hills, in and out of the villages. She was a busy person because she was a nanny, but she was also a very popular sangoma. People came to her for everything: aches and pains, love problems, whatever was wrong. Of course I knew she was a sangoma, but my parents didn't know at all. Otherwise they would never have let her be my nanny. Because they were Christian people and the Christian church forbade it.

Jack paused. He wrapped his arms around his drawn-up knees.

'Nokhanyo had a son, Reverend Vusi Mhlaba. He was the minister of the Anglican church at Ngema Hills, the Holy Trinity Mission. He knew Nokhanyo was a sangoma and he didn't approve at all. Nevertheless they loved each other a great deal. Reverend Vusi was exactly the same age as my father, Jacobus Beyers, and when they were young children they were inseparable. But when my father grew up, and started to believe more in Apartheid, he stopped being friends with Reverend Vusi. They didn't speak to each other anymore.

The Anglican church sent Reverend Vusi away for two years, to the Kalahari desert in the north of South Africa. When he came back, he brought a wife with him. Miriam, your grandmother. And he also brought a baby daughter, Nickelwa. She was to become my wife and your mother.

Miriam and Nickelwa looked very strange to us Ngema Hills children. Because we'd never seen bushmen before. That's what we called the little people from the Kalahari then although it's considered rude now. But as Nickelwa and I grew up together, we became great friends. Her mother, Miriam, was always doing things

for the Church, and after a while she gave birth to a second baby daughter that they called Thandi. So, one way or another, Nokhanyo was often left in charge of both Nickelwa and me. Nickelwa was the little sister I never had.'

I thought things would go on forever, just the way they were. But they didn't. Because suddenly everything changed. It was the government and their stupid, stupid Apartheid. They stole away from me everything that I loved – Nokhanyo, Nickelwa and Ngema Bay Farm.

Black South Africans were starting to get more and more angry about Apartheid. So the white government decided to carve out some little bits of unwanted land here and there and give it to the blacks and tell them to shut up because they had land now. And, very unfortunately for us, the Wild Coast was one of the bits they chose. We loved it there but from the government's point of view all it had was hills and whales and birds and cattle. No gold or diamonds or anything really valuable. So they gave it to the blacks and just after I turned nine they told my family we had to get out.

They gave my father money for another farm. The new farm was in a completely different part of the country, in the Overberg mountains in the southwest of South Africa. He could have gone anywhere but he chose that farm because of the whales. The coastline there is famous for whales – they call it the Whale Coast. The whales also like to visit the bays beneath the Overberg mountains to calve, the same as they did at Ngema Bay. My father said if everything else had to change, at least the whales would stay the same. We put all our things in a truck and we drove for sixteen hours before we got to our new farm.'

Jack broke off. He hugged his knees in silence for a moment.

'I thought my heart would break when we drove out of the farm gates.' he said at last, his voice husky. 'And then a few months later we got news that Nokhanyo had died, and my heart broke all over again.

In the Overberg I went to a primary school with other white children and then a boarding school for Afrikaner boys and then the University of Cape Town to study biology. That was when I started calling myself Jack because it was an



English-speaking university, and I wanted to fit in. I worked very hard and in the end I won a scholarship to study at Oxford University in England.

I was at Oxford for three years and when I got back to South Africa everything had changed. Apartheid had collapsed and there was a new South African government, elected by all the people of South Africa, not just the whites.

I got a job at the University of Cape Town, teaching biology. One day I walked into a new class of students. One of the students, I noticed at once because she was a real knock-out. Although you are strictly not supposed to notice things like that when you're the teacher so I was trying not to look at her. But *she* kept looking at me during the lesson and I was embarrassed because I thought I probably had egg on my face or had spilt milk down my shirt or something like that. I didn't know why such a pretty girl would keep looking at me unless there was a problem. But after the lecture when all the other students had left, she walked right up to me.

'Jack Beyers, don't you remember me?'

Well, I'd never seen her before in my life. Who could forget a girl like that? No, I said.

And she said: 'I'm Nikelwa!'

Jack looked up at Olly for the first time since he had begun to tell his story.

'It was her, Olly! I couldn't believe it. She was the same clever, funny little girl I'd known all those years before, except she was now grown-up, beautiful and a woman. BAM! I was head over heels in love with her that same day.

It's tricky when you fall in love with your student at university. You have to tell your head of department at once because you can't teach them or mark their papers or anything like that because they are your favourite and you might not be fair to the others. So I was very shy but I went to my head of department and I said: 'I think I'm in love with Nikelwa Mhlaba.' And he moved me to another tutor group and I told Nikelwa how I felt. And that was the beginning of Nikelwa and me – our adult life together.

It was a wonderful life, Olly. Your mother, I loved her so much. But we were together for four years and in all that time I didn't tell my parents about her right up until the end. Such a beautiful, clever woman – I should have shouted it from the

rooftops. But I didn't tell them. When I went off to visit them in the Overberg I never took her with me. I just laughed it off when they asked me about girlfriends. I said I was too busy with work. The truth is, Olly, I was too scared to tell them about her. I knew there would be trouble. And she didn't tell Reverend Vusi and Miriam either, not for a long time.

One day, I came home from work and Nikelwa told me she was going to have a baby. She said: 'I'm pregnant, Jack Beyers, and I want to marry you.' So we decided, at last, that it was time to tell our parents.

We told Reverend Vusi and Miriam first. We went up to Ngema Hills to see them. Reverend Vusi was upset. It wasn't what he would have chosen for Nikelwa. He didn't mind so much that I was white but he minded very much that I was an atheist. I didn't believe in God – the Christian God, or any other God. I had stopped believing in God long long ago when I was a child and my parents wanted me to believe that God created Apartheid. I hated the idea that people did whatever wrong things they wanted and then said it was God's will. And I was a scientist. I believed only in what you could see and explain.

But we stayed in Ngema Hills with Reverend Vusi and Miriam for a few days and we talked and in the end he accepted it. Whatever we all felt about things, the baby was coming.

We left Ngema Hills and we drove down to the Overberg to tell my mother and father. When we walked into the farmhouse they were both sitting in the front room. They saw my hand in Nikelwa's hand and my father stood up from his chair and he said: 'Who is this kaffir woman?'

Jack broke off again. His face contorted.

'What does that mean?' asked Olly. 'Kaffir?'

'It's ...' Jack paused. He took a breath and released it slowly.

'It's a word for a black person you used to hear in South Africa. But it's a bad word. It's the most insulting name you can call a black person. I don't like to think about that evening, Olly. There was so much ugliness. My father said some terrible things to Nikelwa. He told her she didn't care about me. She was only after a white man now that Apartheid was over. I could have forgiven him that – he was in shock

and Nikelwa knew I didn't believe any of it. But he also said .... things about you, Olly, that no father will hear said of his child. About how you should never have come into the world. About how black blood mixed with Afrikaner blood must be hidden. He told me to send Nikelwa back to her people and never have anything to do with her again, or you, when you were born. I looked at my mother and she just stood there, wringing her hands in her apron and crying and crying. I said: 'Mama, is this what you want? This is your grandchild.' But she said: 'You must do as your Papa says.'

We walked out of that house and we drove back to Cape Town. I never saw either my mother or my father again. I phoned my father a few times during the pregnancy to try to reason with him. But he couldn't see Nikelwa for what she was, a beautiful, talented woman who loved me. He just saw black, and me white.

Nikelwa had a hard time with the pregnancy. For the first few months she was constantly sick with vomiting. And then she had shooting pains in her legs, and pain in her stomach and her shoulders, and sometimes her hands were numb and some days it hurt her to walk. One morning, very early, she woke me up. She said she'd had a dream about her grandmother, her father's mother, Nokhanyo. I asked her what the dream was about and she said it was very strange. Nokhanyo had told her she had a calling to be a sangoma. That was why she was suffering so much. She needed to train.

I just laughed it off. I said 'Nikelwa – you're a very busy botanist, and you are having a baby in a few months! When are you supposed to find time for a second career as a sangoma?'

She laughed too, but she had the same dream the next night and the next, and every night. One day she said to me: 'Why am I dreaming like this, Jack? Is there a message for me in it? How can I be a sangoma? I am a scientist.'

I told her she was absolutely correct and I joked with her that she had better not let the Dean of Studies hear her carrying on about her sangoma dreams, or they would take away her class medal for being the cleverest student and given her another medal for being the most loopy student.

But there was one thing that I didn't understand – that I didn't like. When she spoke to me of her dreams, she seemed to remember Nokhanyo in such detail. What she wore, how she behaved and, in particular, the way she used to laugh. Nokhanyo had a very distinctive way of laughing - *Ee-eh-eh-eh- heh!* - her whole body would rock with laughter. Now, I remembered Nokhanyo very clearly because I was nine the last time I saw her. But Nikelwa was only three – ahead of her years for a three-year old, but still, just a tiny child. How could she remember Nokhanyo so clearly? I couldn't explain it so I just blocked it out.

And then, another night, she woke me again.

'I dreamed of my grandmother!'

'Oh Nikelwa.' The truth was I was getting fed up with her grandmother-dreams. 'It's all in your head. Nokhanyo has been dead more than twenty years.'

'No! Not Nokhanyo! Sanna! My mother's mother. The San trance-healer from the Kalahari.'

Jack halted, his eyes meeting Olly's.

'Sanna!' murmured Olly. 'She'd dreamed about Sanna?'

Jack nodded. 'I wasn't pleased. I just thought – oh that's terrific. Now I have two bothersome imaginary grandmothers to deal with.'

'How do you know it was Sanna?' I asked her. 'She died when you were tiny. You never even met her.'

'It was definitely her.' Nikelwa's eyes were huge. 'She said she had something to tell me. Our baby – he's a little boy. And when he is old enough, he will become a great healer. He has two powerful healing traditions in his ancestry – the trance dance tradition of the San people, and the sangoma tradition of the Xhosa. She says he will need help when the time comes for him to learn, and we must give him whatever he needs.'

Jack glanced at Olly again and swallowed.

'Your mother - she was trembling. I put my arms around her. I was starting to worry about her. This wasn't normal. I decided to call a psychiatrist first thing in the morning. I would get her help.'

But in the morning she shook me awake. 'What happened about that job in England?'

I'd recently been offered a job in London, lecturing at the Institute of Biological Sciences. I looked at her in surprise. I hadn't even thought seriously about taking the job. Nickelwa was in the middle of her studies in Cape Town.

'I want to go to England,' she said. 'I'm tired of Africa. I'm tired of my dreams. Africa is a continent riddled with superstition. I'm tired of it all.'

'But what about your studies?'

She said she was going to take a break anyway for the baby, and she could begin her studies again in England. She was very determined about it. She wanted to leave Africa at once.

So we packed up and we left for England. We bought the flat in Finchley, and I started work at the Institute. It was November when we got there and you were due to be born in February. Poor Nickelwa – she wasn't very prepared for a British winter. Now on top of being bothered with pregnancy aches and pains she was also freezing cold. I started to doubt that we had done the right thing in coming to England. I was still worried about her. She was saying some weird and crazy things.

One night she said: 'Jack, I am not going to live much longer. You must take care of the boy for me.' After the dream about Sanna, she always spoke about the baby as a boy.

I said: 'Shut up, Nickelwa! It's not true. Don't talk like that – it freaks me out.'

It was snowing the night you were born, Olly. The labour when on and on for hours and hours with the snow drifting past the window. I felt so bad because Nickelwa was struggling and struggling to get you out, in terrible pain, and I thought – what have I done? I've got my little San wife pregnant with a big Afrikaner baby and now the baby's stuck inside her.

But in the end you came out. The midwife said: 'You have a son, Mr Beyers'. And they held you up, and I just stared at this extraordinary little person, and I couldn't believe it, although we had known you were coming for months. You weren't a big Afrikaner baby at all – you were a tiny, beautiful, perfect little San baby. I just stared and stared.'

Nikelwa said to the midwife – would you leave me with my husband and my child for a little bit? – and the midwife left the room.’

She was cradling the baby – you – against her skin, and her eyes were full of tears. She said: ‘I love you, Jack Beyers, but I will leave you this night.’

You know women get very depressed sometimes when they have a baby, and she’d had such a tough pregnancy and then a gruelling labour. I said: ‘You’ve got the baby blues, Nikelwa. I’ll get you help. I am going to talk to the psychiatrist here in the morning. Just rest tonight, and we will sort everything out in the morning.’

She said: ‘I won’t be here for you in the morning, Jack. You need to listen to the things I want to say.’ You were in her arms. She looked down at you and she said: ‘I haven’t made the right decisions with my life, Jack. I should not have run from my calling and I should not have run from Africa. When I am gone, you must take our child back to Africa. My little sister Thandi will help you to take care of him.’

I said: ‘Nikelwa – don’t talk like this! I am going to get you the help you need.’ But she said: ‘Jack – I am so tired. All I need is for you to listen. I want you to call the boy Ndlovu. He will be a healer as I would have been if I had listened to my calling. His spirit ancestors will search for him, and they will search for him by the name of Ndlovu, the elephant. Because his spirit is touched by the spirit of the elephant, and elephants will be important to him, especially when his time for learning comes.’

The midwife came in then and she said it was time for me to go home. I went back to the flat and I lay down on the sofa. I felt tired and very confused. I didn’t understand why Nikelwa was behaving like she was. I felt appalled at the thought of having a tiny baby and a depressed wife to deal with. And no-one to help me. I must have fallen asleep because I woke up to hear the phone ringing. They told me to come back to the hospital at once. I got there and I rushed up to the birth ward and a doctor came out and led me into a small, private room and he made me sit down. And he said Nikelwa had lost a lot of blood in the night ... Nikelwa had ... Nikelwa was ... she was ...’

Jack Beyers stopped talking. He fidgeted with his hands on his lap for some moments. Then he cleared his throat and continued.

'I did what she asked me to do, some of it. They gave me compassionate leave from the university and I took you back to Cape Town, where Thandi lived. Thandi has a little boy of her own who is a year older than you, and she was just finishing with breast-feeding him. So she could feed you. She was very kind to you, and to me. I didn't know what to call you. How could I call you Ndlovu? I was in such a state but I was expected back at the university in six months, and what boy in Finchley is called Ndlovu Beyers? It was Thandi who suggested I call you Oliver. She said it had a similar sound to Ndlovu. I had told her that Nickelwa asked to call you Ndlovu but I didn't tell her the part about the spirit ancestors. Thandi is Christian, and I thought it would upset her. I went up to Ngema Hills to show you to your grandparents. Reverend Vusi and Miriam were good to me there. They were in a lot of pain about Nickelwa but if they blamed me for what had happened, they didn't show it. They said, even without Nickelwa, we were all family and we would look after each other.

When the six months the university gave me for leave was up, I came back to Finchley with you. I could have stayed in Cape Town and got my old job at the University of Cape Town back. Thandi and Reverend Vusi begged me to stay. But the truth is, Olly, I was relieved to return to London. Thandi treated you like her own child but each way I turned in Cape Town, I just saw Nickelwa. It broke my heart there, Olly. I missed her in everything. Every single place was so full of memories.

I said to Reverend Vusi and Miriam and Thandi that I would bring you back often. But it was a lie because in all the times we've been to Africa, I've avoided the places that were special for Nickelwa and me, and I've never seen any of them again. I haven't been fair to Nickelwa's family because they are a part of you too. But I just made my life about you, and about work, and I tried to shut out the past.

Jack Beyers drew a long, ragged breath. All the while that he had been telling his story, he had kept his gaze focused on the linoleum floor in front of him, only glancing from time to time at Olly, who still knelt beside him. But now he looked up, and his eyes found Abby, in her chair set against the rondavel wall.

'Nikelwa had one more dream about Sanna, the night before she died. She woke me up and she said Sanna had a message for me. When the time of learning came for the baby another healer would come into our lives – a woman. She said the healer would matter very much to me and would become important. I thought she meant a traditional healer, a trance healer or a sangoma, and it was part of all the other twaddle I didn't want to hear. But now I think, Abby, the message was about you. You were the healer who would come into our lives and be important.'

Abby stood up from her chair. She came and knelt beside Jack and put her arms around him. She hugged him for a long while. Then she opened her arms and pulled Olly onto her lap so that the three of them were nestled together. She looked up at Lesedi.

'What happens now, Lesedi? What has to happen when a person realizes he is a sangoma? What did you mean earlier when you said he needed to go and train?'

Lesedi was silent for some moments, deep in thought. He pulled at his chin with one hand, and fingered the strands of beadwork that hung at his chest with the other.

'A sangoma can't turn his back on his calling.' he said at last. 'But it is unusual for the spirits to call one so young. Usually, a person will be fully grown when the spirits call for their service. And when they realize their calling, they go to train. But sangoma training is long and difficult, and Oliver is just a child.'

Olly eased himself off Abby's lap. He sat down on his bed.

'But Lesedi, I *have* to train. Sanna and Nokhanyo have told me over and over. If I don't train, my problems will go on. They will get worse.'

'Yes Oliver, you are right in this. It is a very serious thing to be called to be a sangoma. It is a great honour, but it is also a burden. Jack, Abby, come and sit next to the boy.'

They joined Olly, settling on either side of him on his small single bed.

'For now, Oliver,' continued Lesedi, 'While you are still a child, you are not expected to train. Your training can wait until you finish at school and you become a man. But you need to announce to the spirits of your ancestors, and yourself, that you accept that you have been called.'



Jack put his hand on Olly's knee.

'How does he do that?'

'He needs to go to a place of training – what we call an *mpanda*. He will meet with the teacher and she will hold an announcement ceremony for him.' Lesedi leaned forward, across the space between the two beds, his good eye focused on Jack. 'When I was called, I was not a young man. I was already in my fifties. The calling can come at any age, and for me, it came late in life, when my youthful pride was less and I was ready to listen. But I went to train in Botswana - at an *mpanda* just outside the Botswanan capital of Gaborone. It is a very good *mpanda*, with a wise and experienced teacher.' He paused, and his gaze shifted from Jack to Olly. 'Olly, Botswana is the country just next to South Africa. I was planning to go up there in July to visit my old teacher and gather medicines. If you wanted, Olly, and your father allowed it, I could take you to the *mpanda*. You could meet the teachers and we could announce your future intention to train as a *thwasa*. That is what we call a new sangoma student. A *thwasa*.'

'A *thwasa*,' said Olly softly. His face contorted and his eyes slid sideways to meet his father's.

'The children have their next term of school now,' said Jack slowly, 'and then they have a holiday for six weeks, in July and August. I could take leave. I haven't made any plans yet. But Abby ...'. He looked at her anxiously, over Olly's head.

'We will all go to Botswana in July,' said Abby firmly. 'You and I and Olly, and Emma and Christopher. We will talk to Emma and Christopher about it in the morning. We will all go to Botswana together because that is what Olly needs.'

## BACK IN ENGLAND

Mrs Briggs rang the bell that she kept on the Teachers' Table to signal the end of lunchtime for the Upper Juniors. All the pupils stood up together, and when she rang the bell again they started to file out of the dining hall doors, year by year. They were supposed to walk swiftly along the corridors and then straight out to their designated playground. That was the rule. Christopher and Alfie Pattison, at the head of the Year 6 column, left the dining hall straight after the bell rang. But they took a very long time actually reaching the door that opened out onto the Upper Juniors playground because they were playing a game to see who could stamp the most times on the other one's foot.

Alfie had just delivered a final triumphant stamp when he noticed Olly Beyers passing by in the middle of the Year 5 column. He nudged Christopher.

'Chris – I've got a good one for him. This is gonna crack you up. Hey Barking! Barking!'

Olly had been looking down at his schoolbag but he glanced over at Alfie. Alfie howled:

*'I'm Barking!*

*I'm so dizz-eee!*

*My problem is ...*

*I might go wheee!'*

Alfie spun fast on his heel and collapsed in a heap on the floor. The heap started to laugh but it still managed to yell -

*'But don't wo- rree*

*Or fret for me.*

*Just put me in a nappy*

*In case I pee!'*

He looked up at Christopher, laughing helplessly. Olly eyed Christopher.

After Lesedi's diagnosis and Jack's confession, Olly had fallen into a deep, sound sleep. When he woke it was morning. He showered and dressed and went outside. He saw there was a picnic table laid with breakfast things in front of the chalet, and everyone else was already up and eating breakfast. As Olly took a seat at the table, Lesedi joined them. He launched without preamble into an explanation to Emma and Christopher of what a sangoma was and about Olly being one and about how they were all to meet up again in a few months in Botswana for Olly's announcement ceremony. Emma nodded a lot and asked questions. Christopher didn't ask any questions. He just ate slice after slice of toast and jam during the rather lengthy explanation, and looked at Olly thoughtfully from time to time. Eventually he said: 'Well, I guess that explains some things I *really* didn't understand.'

Then they had all packed up their things, driven through to Johannesburg and boarded the aeroplane to England, where the Bentleys and the Beyers were seated in different parts of the plane. In the morning they had shared a taxi back to Finchley and when the taxi dropped the Bentleys off first at 27 Paradise Crescent everything seemed okay. But that was yesterday, when it was just Olly and Emma and Christopher. And now they were back at school, with all the other kids.

Christopher stood back from the doorway.

'Hey, Olly.'

'Hey, Chris.'

Christopher made a little movement with his head, to show Olly to go through the doorway.

'Seeya, Olly.'

'Seeya, Chris.'

Olly made his way towards his alley. Alfie stood up slowly from the floor. He stared at Christopher.

'What the ...?'

'He saved Emma's life,' said Christopher 'She had malaria and we were stuck in the bush because these elephant poachers tried to kill us. We were in Africa 'cos his dad is dating my mum.'

'He – WHAT? You were ... poachers? Africa? *What are you talking about?*'  
Christopher burst out laughing at his friend's face.

'You gotta give him a break. Don't call him Barking – that's just stupid and mean. Olly's really cool. Honest. You just have to give him a chance. C'm on, let's go hang off the monkey bars and I'll tell you all about it.'

Olly arrived at his alleyway and settled down amongst the leaf debris. His amulet hung on a leather thong, under his school shirt against his bare skin. He reached into his schoolbag and got his book out. It was a new book that Jack had bought him from the duty free bookshop in the Johannesburg airport. But he was still using the bookmark that he had fashioned from a matchbox at Letaba – the one which showed a red-ink drawing of a lion resting on its forepaws. The sun was shining and it was quite warm. He reached into his schoolbag again and extricated a bottle of apple juice his father had given him that morning, although he had almost finished it in the short break. From time to time, he glanced at the playground. Children were running back and forth, rollercoastering boisterously down the slide and clambering over the adventure frame. Christopher and Alfie hung upside down with their knees cocked over the monkey bars and their shirts puddled around their chests so that their belly buttons showed. Emma lay on her stomach on the lawn in a huddle of girls, chatting. He heard a faint beep and she reached into her pocket and pulled out her mobile phone. That was naughty because you weren't allowed to have your phone switched on during school hours.

'You finished with that bottle, lad?'

Olly looked up. It was Mr Simpson, the grumpy caretaker at Finchley Central Primary who went round at lunchtime spiking rubbish on his rubbish spiker and telling off children who didn't put their litter in the bins. Olly nodded and held out the empty juice bottle. But as he did so, he tipped it a little. It wasn't quite empty because the last few drops of juice dribbled out of the nozzle and dripped onto his bookmark, saturating the cardboard.

Olly dropped the bottle and snatched up the bookmark so that the sticky juice wouldn't get into his book and glue the pages together. The cardboard rectangle fell between his fingers, landing picture-side up in the leaf debris.

The lion in the picture moved. The beast had been lying in its sphinx-like position but as Olly's eyes flashed over the bedraggled bit of cardboard, the lion swung his haughty, heavily-maned head to face Olly. He yawned – a wide, full yawn so that all four of his great, sharp incisor teeth stood out in red-inked detail. Then he snapped his powerful jaws shut, blinked lazily, turned his head and resumed his former pose.

Olly blinked as well. His mouth fell open. Against the skin of his chest, he felt a sudden warmth coming from the amulet. He looked up at Mr Simpson.

'Buck up,' said Mr Simpson impatiently. 'I haven't got all day wastin' me time collectin' rubbish from the likes of you.'

Olly picked up the bottle again and gave it to the caretaker. Mr Simpson sniffed. He plunged his spiker into Olly's bookmark and released the bookmark into the black plastic refuse sack he carried. He walked off.

Olly frowned, and rubbed his left eye with his finger. Just then, the bell rang for the end of break. Christopher and Alfie dropped off the monkey bars. Emma and her friends stood up, and bent to brush stray blades of grass from their knees. Emma and Christopher both turned to look over at Olly at the same time. They waved at him. Emma was holding her phone in her waving hand.

'Olly! That was a text from Mum. She's left a message with Mrs Briggs, as well. We haven't got to go to Homework Club this afternoon because she's finishing early and she says she'll pick us up and take us to the woods. Do you want to come? Mum's asked your dad already and he says it's fine.'

Olly nodded. He put his book back in his satchel, stood up and ran over to join his friends.

