



**THE GOOD KING
AND OTHER STORIES**

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The Good King

There was a king in a land far from this place, where the moon sits purple "Future Shoes" of night, and the corn plants praise the golden sun.

This king, whose name was Thomas, was rich with gold and treasure, and a splendid court, and a great house, and shopkeepers, and farms, and cathedrals, and armies, and thousands of loyal subjects. The nations feared him. The people revered him, though they never saw his face.

For he seldom left his castle, and his people did not know him. He was thought to be cold, and aloof. He wanted very much to be a good king for them, to govern his people wisely. To him that meant working long, hard days, exhausting his scribes, and burning many candles to the nub. He worked tirelessly to serve his people, but he was not happy. He did not feel he knew his people, or that they knew him.

Now it happened that one day, King Thomas grew impatient with the long hours and rustling paper and the thick castle air. He decided to venture out into his domain. He canceled his appointments, and telling no one, he dressed in ordinary clothing, as a traveling seller of silks, taking only a purse of gold, a letter of

recommendation, and a ruby ring. He slipped past the guards at the castle gate, and out into the city.

The city bazaars were a rainbow of color, and voices, and music. What will you give me for this fine lamp?, a vendor cried. Ribbons! I have ribbons of scarlet and gold!, cried another. Onion pies! Hot from my stone oven!, cried a third.

Thomas was glad to see the merriment and prosperity of the booths. People were buying and selling, and laughing and talking. It meant he was succeeding in his efforts as king, that his people should be so happy.

He wandered through the square, where the children of the city's merchants were playing ring-o-leary. He walked down streets where the grand houses of his administrators gave way to the smaller houses of the ordinary people, and beyond them, the hovels and shacks of the city's poor.

He stood by a lamppost and watched a man beat a donkey with a stick. He saw a woman drag her daughter by one hand into the sagging doorway of an open hut. He saw a famished child sitting listlessly in the shadow of the cathedral wall. He heard the wail of a baby from one of the houses, sounding frightened and miserable.

A tear rolled down his cheek. He had not known such unhappiness existed. He was ashamed he had let his country slip into such misery.

As evening drew near, he was walking in the shadow of a dark bridge when two men accosted him. "Your money or your life, one man hissed, and he felt the other man's arms encircle him.

"Take my money," said Thomas, thinking of the poverty he had seen that day. "Take it, and buy what you need. I want you to have it."

The thieves took his purse from the king's belt and shook it to hear the clink of gold coins. The one thief threw the purse to the other, who snatched it away and laughed.

The two men turned and glowered at the Thomas. "You never saw us," they told him. Thomas watched as the two thieves skipped away down the cobbled street.

Troubled, he wandered down the alleyways. He was hungry, and cold, and sad. He stopped in the doorway of a humble home. Inside he saw the embers of a warm fire glowing, and a woman sitting by it, wrapped in a shawl. Summoning his courage, he knocked.

"Excuse me, missus," he told the woman who peered at him from the window, "can you spare a traveler a piece of bread, and a place by your fire?"

How do I know you are not the brigand Milan, come to kill me in my sleep? the woman demanded? A poor woman cannot open her door in these dark times. Begone, and God's grace with you.

Begging forgiveness, the king slipped away. Walking in rapid strides, he hastened back to the palace. He must sit down with his advisors at once and plot ways to do away with the poverty and crime he had witnessed. He must enlist the help of his armies to put an end to injustice and uncaring .

The moon's rays found him beside the great palace gate. A trickle of rain dampened his head and shoulders. His agitation was plain on his face. He presented himself to the officer of the hour.

"I am the king," he said. "Let me enter."

The officer approached, along with another dragoon. "The king? At this hour? Be away with you, fool!"

"I tell you I am your master the king."

One of the dragoons held a lantern to his face and torn clothes, saw the dried tears on his face. "The king, eh?" he sneered. He turned to his companion. "You recognize the king, don't you?"

"Oh, indeed I do. All hail his highness the king!" the dragoon said, and spat.

"Lunatic," the officer said, "have you your papers?"

The dragoons went through his pockets. They found no identification, but they did find his letter of recommendation, stamped with the king's private seal. One dragoon read it to the other:

WHO BEARS THIS LETTER IS OUR SOVEREIGN KING.

The dragoons hooted with laughter. "You, our king?" one of them said. "Our king is a great man, noble of countenance, all-powerful. You are a madman, an imposter. Shame on you! I should have your ears cut off. In fact, I think I will," he said, and drew his sword.

But the other dragoon held him back. "That's a fine cotton coat he wears, he whispered. And the night is wicked cold."

While one dragoon snatched the cloak from the king's shoulders, the other tore his letter into bits.

"If you are truly king you will have no trouble replacing a simple cloak," they said. And they

pushed him to the ground, and laughed, and strode away.

Cold to his bones, Thomas made his way back down the unfamiliar streets, past house after house. Every house was dark, now. Even the chimney of the frightened woman was cold and still now. He shivered and walked on in the drizzle, across the city bridge, out into the open farmland and up into the hilly pastures surrounding the city.

Thomas was furious that his own soldiers were criminals. His entire kingdom was a kind of lie. Its king was good, but its people were in pain. He needed time to think, to plan a course of action.

He walked for hours across meadows and through trees. An owl taunted him from the branch of a fir tree. "Who? Who?" Finally he came to a rude lean-to with a thatch roof. Inside it smelled like animals, and the sound of water dripping from holes in the thatch. He found a piece of rotted burlap and wrapped it round his shoulders. He removed his shoes and set them aside, and brushed the mud from between his toes. He lay in the damp straw and he slept.

He woke in the morning to a strange sensation. A ewe stood next to him, licking his hair. He could smell the sheep's wet wool.

Bewildered, the disheveled king sat and rubbed his eyes. He was halfway up a tall hill. Below him a dozen sheep grazed, and not far from them, a boy, perhaps eight years of age.

"Hello, there," he called. But the boy did not look up toward him. "Hello," he called again, "I am lost, could you tell me where I am?" But the boy gave no sign of acknowledging him.

Thomas rose and, shoeless, began stumbling down the path toward the boy. The stones and thistles stung his soft feet. Even when he drew near the boy did not turn around.

"Boy," he said, touching the boy's shoulder. But the boy whirled around, astonished, as if he had not heard him approaching. The boy's eyes were wild and dark, they fluttered with alertness. His face bore the marks of many beatings.

Thomas looked at the boy's startled expression and understood. "You cannot hear, can you," he said softly. The boy shook his head. "And I am very lost," the king said.

The boy broke a piece of bread in half and shared it with the king. Then he led him to a brook, where he satisfied his thirst. As the king looked into the water in his cupped hands, he saw his

face, chapped and bruised. He no longer looked like any sort of king. He looked like a man of no great account. The only sign of his identity was the ruby ring on his right hand, the ring of the realm.

As the day wore on, the boy led his flock to the next hill to graze, and Thomas followed. All day they walked along the rocky ridge, following where the sheep led them. When the sun began to set, the boy took him by the hand and took him over the hilltop and into the next valley. They walked along a copse of poplar trees until they came to a tent of skins and cloth.

Inside Thomas heard men speaking loudly. "Where is that boy?" "Why was water not fetched?" "I'll teach that dreamer a lesson with my knout!"

Thomas pulled the boy aside. He wanted to tell the boy not to go in. The boy patted his hand, as if to say, he had no choice. Thomas waited under a tall tree. He listened as the men took turns shouting. "Lazy idiot!" "Hit him for me, too!" "The dolt kicked over my wine!"

He heard a crash, as if something had been thrown to the ground and broken. Someone cursed, and the king could just make out against the lantern light, the sight of an arm raised against the boy.

Thomas rushed in, and confronted three men in rough attire. The boy was on the ground, trembling, his hands over his head. One of the men was striking him again and again with a knotted scrap of leather.

"Stop!" the king cried. In a rage, he held up his ring, the red ruby glinting in the candle light. Take this, and let the boy be!

The men looked crazily at him in the dim light. His hair was bedraggled, his face was haggard, with dried drops of blood on his brow. The red jewel glittered magically above him.

"Get the ring!" one man cried, and they gathered around him, and pushed him to the ground, and struck him with their fists. Thomas moaned. He curled into a ball and groaned.

He awoke in the dark. The tent had been packed up and taken away. The men were gone, as were their sacks and their donkey. His ring was gone. All that remained were the king and the boy, sleeping bare-legged on the open ground, with a handful of sheep bleating around them.

Thomas sat up, and knelt by the boy, gathering him up in his arms. The two together were warmer than each apart.

King Thomas sat in the darkness, rocking the boy in his arms. Perhaps this was enough, he thought. Perhaps kings cannot really be kings, he thought. They are too far away from the people, what they were thinking and feeling. People dream of kings, but kings don't matter. High above them a star shot briefly across the sky, then disappeared. And they rocked, and rocked, and rocked.

Back in the city, the word went out that the king had abdicated and fled. From what, no one was certain.

Some said he had run away with a princess to her country. Some said he had lost his mind, and was in the towers still, muttering to himself and playing with his fingers. Perhaps plotters had poisoned him. Perhaps he had taken the crown jewels and betrayed his own country. Clearly he had never been a good king.

And so, in the kingdom where the moon sits purple "Future Shoes" of night, and the corn plants praise the golden sun, a new king was installed, a cousin of the old king. The new king was praised far and wide. Unlike his predecessor, he would be a good king.

At the coronation procession through the city, people from all over the kingdom filled the streets to cheer their new leader. The new king commanded that coins be thrown to the cheering people, and the imperial trumpets blared.

And no one took notice, among the roaring throng, of a shepherd boy on an older man's shoulders, shouting louder than all the rest. For he had caught a royal coin, and shared it with his father.

The Mountain With Poor Self-Esteem

There once was a mountain, high up in the Rockies, who did not feel good about himself.

Oh sure, he was tall. But there were lots taller ones,

He was snow-capped. But just barely.

Oh, he had wildlife. But mostly the same-old, same-old. Your squirrels and raccoons and such.

He of course, had the sun in the morning and the moon at night. But criminy, who doesn't?

Something was missing, and it made him visibly droop. Sometimes he would heave a huge sigh, and giant rocks would tumble down his sides and land on station wagons and school buses.

He didn't care. He was a mountain.

The other mountains were not much help.

"There's one mountain that will never amount to a hill of beans," one of them said.

"If I had an attitude like that, I think I would flip upside down and spend eternity as a plateau," said another.

"Yeesh," all the other mountains said. For it was their nature to agree on most things.

So what was the mountain's problem exactly?

Darned if we know. But it laid him low, or as low as a 7,482 foot object could be laid low.

One day the old wise hootie owl roosted on his peak and tried to cheer him up.

"You know," the wise old hootie owl said, "maybe what you need is a hobby, to take your mind off things. Have you given any thought to forestry, or mining?"

But the mountain was in no mood for a pep talk.

"Oh, blow it out your beak, hootie owl," he said and scowled, causing a landslide on his north slope.

One day the mountain felt an itch on its nose. Well, it wasn't a nose exactly. It was more of a crag. But you get the idea.

What the itch was, was a human child, splashing under a waterfall.

Do you think the child would be splashing under the waterfall if it knew it came from the mountain's nose? Probably not.

But anyway.

The mountain called out angrily: "Who dares to splash under my waterfall? Why, I'll erupt, that's what I'll do. I'll spew hot lava all over until your shoes melt!"

You see, depressed mountains are often quite irritable.

But the child was no idiot. "You're not a volcano, silly" the child said. "You're just a regular old mountain."

The mountain simmered at this upbraiding. Who was this child, and where did it come off addressing him in such a fashion?

"You know," the child said, "I like you very much. You're beautiful, and the air around you is fresh, and I love the streams splashing down your sides."

"I'm so sure!:" the mountain replied. The mountain did not get many compliments, and so was not very gracious about them.

"I'm serious," said the child. "If you were back where I come from, you would be the greatest thing in the whole state!"

"And what state is that?" the mountain asked. He wanted to sound like he knew a lot about geography, because -- well, he was largely geographical in nature himself. But in truth, the mountain did not get around much.

"Minnesota," the child said.

"Ah, Minnesota," the mountain side. And wondered to himself: "Where the heck is that?"

"What is Minnesota like? Is it like here among my Rocky friends?"

"Nope. It's flat as a pancake. You'd be the toast of the state."

After the child left, the mountain pondered the possibilities. "A mountain in Minnesota -- even a relatively low-altitude mountain like myself -- could do very well," he thought.

When the first rays of sunshine alit on his snow-capped dome, he had made his mind up.

Using all his will and determination, the mountain began his slow migration to Minnesota.

It wasn't easy. The mountain calculated that it was moving at approximately the rate of one inch per year. But he had plenty of time, and he was confident the child would wait for him.

That's when the mountain got lucky. A wizard was traveling through the mountain pass and had a flat tire. The mountain knew he was a wizard because his car had a bumper sticker that said Washington Wizards.

And so, despite his general reluctance to engage adult humans in conversation, he approached the wizard with a request.

"Great wizard, I am trying to get to Minnesota."

"Who said that?" asked the wizard in alarm.

"The mountain," said the mountain. "I wish to go to Minnesota to start a new life. But I feel my progress to date has not been very good. I was hoping you might know a shortcut."

"Silly mountain," the wizard said. "Don't you know, you can go anywhere you want just by clicking your heels together and wishing it so?"

"I don't have heels," the mountain said. "I'm a mountain."

"Well, actually, it's the wishing part that does the magic," the wizard said.

And after the wizard fixed his tire and sped away, the mountain closed its eyes -- actually, one eye was a cave and the other was a stretch of scarred red rock -- and made a wish.

"I wish I may, I wish I might, be the tallest mountain in Minnesota tonight."

And with a light swish -- and also a lot of very loud grinding noises, kind of like a hundred trains falling off a bridge onto one another -- the mountain lifted up into the air and felt itself borne

eastward, across the great prairies, and landed with a little thump -- kind of like the moon crashing into New York City -- next to a small Minnesota town called Brewster.

And oh, the welcome the mountain received the next morning!

The children were first to see it, as they went out to catch their buses to school. Instead of boarding their buses, they all rushed to climb the mountain.

They climbed in the trees and splashed in the streams. They jumped from rock to rock, and gathered snow in their hands in the middle of July.

They saw eagles soaring and hummingbirds darting back and forth.

They bear cubs playing and pumas crouching.

"Yahh!" said the kids, as they ran from the pumas.

Things were sure going to be a lot different around Brewster.

Eventually the adults caught on as well. Having a mountain in town was going to be good for business and good for the economy. Even if it was sitting right where the high school used to be.

And the mountain, now standing 7,482 feet taller than everything else for hundreds of miles, began to feel very different. It was special. It was majestic. It was appreciated.

And it spent the next million years in Brewster, except for annual vacations in Cleveland, where it was really, really appreciated.

So if you're a mountain, and sometimes you don't feel so good about yourself, maybe you just need a change of scene. New friends, who can see you the way you really are.

Look for a place where you can be somebody, even if you're only 7,482 feet tall.

But don't go to Minnesota. Because that will just mess everything up.

Why the Hippo Calls Canada Home

If you travel to Canada, you will see many special Canadian sights. You will see her great cities of steel and glass. You will see the vast prairie grasslands, rippling in the breeze. You will see her fleet of fishing boats. The Canadian Mounties, in their bright red coats. The majestic, snow-capped Canadian Rockies.

And just as typically, you will see the herds of Canadian hippopotami, meandering through the wetlands, alongside the moose and elk. The graceful aquatic hippos, braving the mighty falls at Niagara. The shaggy-coated woolly hippos of the Great North, blinking away the ice and snow.

They seem every bit as Canadian as snowshoes. But many people do not realize that the hippopotamus is not native to Canada. Indeed, it did not even come to our fair land until recently. This is the story of how the hippos came to Canada.

Mtumba was a creature of the blue river. She and her parents and the entire shiny black race of

river creatures dwelt among the reeds and grasses of the Upper Nile.

They were large creatures. Grown adults weighed a ton, two tons, or even more. Their skin was taut and unwrinkled, as if they were inflated with air, like big black shiny tires.

The hippos were mild-mannered. They had no enemies, though occasionally a crocodile or a hyena would make off with a little one. Sometimes hippos fought with one another. Two old bulls would occasionally argue about one thing or another, and they would clap their enormous mouths at each other.

Sometimes they really hurt one another. Mtumba would wince and duck beneath the muddy water, but usually nothing ever came of it.

The days were long, and the sun was hot. But Mtumba and her parents kept cool by remaining in the water, rolling and bounding along the muddy bottom. Mtumba liked to chase after her mother, holding onto her tail with her teeth, up and down through the muddy surging river. Although awkward on land, in the water they danced and glided like slow-motion blimps in a kind of bratwurst ballet.

Mtumba liked to lie in the water and spin round and round, until she stopped. Then, when she stopped spinning, she liked to lie perfectly still in the water and feel the bubbles collect along the

length of her rubbery body. One by one, the bubbles rose from her. When they rose to the surface they made a funny, underwater burbling noise, and Mtumba could feel each one tickle, and a little shiver up and down her back.

At night the hippos climbed up out of the river and roamed the riverbanks under the full yellow moon, munching on pears, roots, and fresh green leaves. When she was happy, and her belly was full, she would wiggle her stubby little tail around in a circle, like a propeller. It was a sweet life for Mtumba and her family.

And then she met Mobutu.

Mobutu was from a family farther up the river, who wandered down her way when the rains did not come and the mud became too thick. When she first saw Mobutu she did not think much of him. Mtumba's mother called them "upriver people" -- not a flattering thing, to be sure.

But Mtumba loved to watch Mobutu take running jumps off the riverbanks. His supple black body seemed suspended in the air, for a milisecond anyway, before galumphing into the muddy water. When he surfaced again, and buckets of water came rusjing back out between his peg teeth, she saw a light in his eyes that reminded her of her own, brimming with determination to live a life. She liked that.

In the spring of her third year, Mtumba and Mobutu spent every day playing in the swirling waters, diving deep down, surfacing, snorting, and laughing at the sight of each other. They would loll in the rushes in the cool of the evening, discussing the grass, and the fish, and the clouds passing overhead. Without ever thinking about it, they had become friends for life, and each knew life without the other was impossible.

And then the hunter came.

The hunter was not a bad man, exactly. He did not come to kill hippos, as other hunters did. Mtumba had heard that poachers sometimes killed a full-grown hippo just to make umbrella-stands of the legs. Other hunters killed hippos for their ivory teeth, which were then carved into false teeth for people.

But this hunter did not even have a gun. He stood behind a blind of palm fronds all day, watching them through binoculars. Mtumba's mother warned her to stay away, that humans were bad business, even the ones without guns.

That night, when the hippos rose up out of the river for their evening stroll, Mtumba found a healthy euphorbia plant and was plucking the juicy leaves off, one by one, with her lips. She did not hear as three men tiptoed behind her, threw a blanket over her head, flipped her on her back

and dragged her away, crying out for her mother, from the riverbank to the campsite of the hunter.

Mtumba never saw her mother or Mobutu again.

Mtumba was herded by three men through the jungle, for several miles. Above her the monkeys sang to her, telling her they were sorry for her. Mtumba rolled her eyes upward at her friends, and a single large teardrop formed, and dribbled down her face.

Mtumba was led up the gangplank of a river boat, and led down again into the hold of the boat, where she stayed for several days as the riverboat made its way down river. In the port city she could hear the shouts and cries of the bazaar. The people were buying and selling-- bananas, sugar, rice, and now, Mtumba.

Mtumba was placed in a wooden crate and shipped by truck to the airport. There she was pulled on rollers into an airplane. The airplane took off, and in the roar and vibration Mtumba took her first rest in days. In the dark roar of the airplane, Mtumba dreamed of the warm waters of home, of her family and friends, and the taste of green grass in her mouth.

Mtumba was awakened to the opening freight door of the airplane. She was transferred to another truck, and rode in the back half a day. When the door opened, she found herself in a strange kind of city. Located next to a huge lake,

it reminded her of home. She smelled the scent of fish from the water, and many animals on the land. Many of the scents were familiar to her, a few were not. She was in a zoo.

Mtumba was given a cage in a tiled barn called the pachyderm house. It was a dank, smelly place. They fed her hay and some kind of biscuit made from cereals. It was not too bad, but the hay was nowhere near as fresh and delicious as the grasses that grew alongside her native river. And the biscuits were the same, day in and day out. Her keepers called her Ethel.

The scenery around her did not change, either. She spent her nights and mornings in a tiled room, with bars on one side. People would walk past her all day long. They would laugh. The little ones would run back to bring their parents, then point at her. Everyone always laughed. She looked out at them, hoping for some expression of understanding, or sympathy.

People only laughed, and threw things. Popcorn, paper bags and cartons. Banana peels. Apple cores. Human beings seemed like decent creatures. Perhaps, however, they did not have the depth of feeling of others. It wasn't their fault -- it was just the way they were.

Beside her was a pair of black rhinoceroses that the handlers called Roscoe and Myra. She knew that was not their real names, but as she did not

speak rhinoceros, she was unable to learn who they really were. They seemed nice, although a little settled down for Mtumba, who was still young and anxious for some kind of excitement.

In a pool across from Mtumba was a group of crocodiles and alligators. Mtumba could not understand the alligators, but she knew what the crocodiles were thinking. They were not very bright, and they did not have much to say. But every so often it was fun to have a word or two with them. One old crocodile had an name that was unpronounceable. It went something like Kraaaaaaak. Though not exactly kindly, she was a tolerant creature, and she was an honest one.

On the other side were three elephants, one of them from Africa. Her name was Zapiti, and Mtumba could talk to Zapiti. Zapiti ached for the grassy savannas and the tall trees she could break with her tusks. Here there was only bricks and steel bars. Some days Zapiti would spend rocking back and forth, shifting the weight from one foot to the next, in an endless see-saw rhythm.

The other animals said Zapiti was crazy, but really she was just homesick. The two Asian elephants seemed calmer than Zapiti, but Mtumba could not understand what they said. But she could guess. They were saying that creatures in captivity all became a little strange over time.

As well as the zookeepers treated them, animals want to be home, to be free.

Mtumba did not plan on being alone, however. She was carrying a secret inside her -- a baby, Mobutu's baby. Mtumba was able to bear the homesickness because she knew that she was not alone. Soon, she would give birth to a little one with a face like her own -- someone to love and to call her own.

She did not tell anyone her secret. But one day the old crocodile said to her, Mtumba, you are with child, aren't you? Mtumba waddled over to the old lizard and said that yes, she was.

I am sad for you, said the old crocodile.

Sad? Mtumba asked. How could her greatest happiness be sad?

Because, the old crocodile said, the zoo often sells our young to other zoos. You see Zapiti over there, always swinging her head to and fro? She did not do that until they took away her calf.

Mtumba felt fear grip her. She knew she could never be happy at the zoo alone. Worse, she would never see her baby again, never know if he were happy, or safe, or being cared for. It was terrible to be taken from her home and family. She could not bear to have her baby taken from her, too.

One night, Mtumba lay in the corner of her pen. Her time had come, but she was determined not to make a sound. She gave birth to a baby son late in the night, a 275-pound baby boy. As Mtumba gazed into his shiny blinking eyes, she knew where she had seen that look before that expression of determination -- it was the face of her beloved Mobutu.

Mother and child rested for a couple of hours. Then, summoning her strength, she leaned into the brick wall that had enclosed her through the summer. She pitted the weight of her body, a good 3800 pounds of muscle, against the spot she had decided was weakest. For weeks she had been worrying this spot, seeming to scratch herself against it, in the same sing-song rhythm of Zapiti next door. Caretakers whispered that Ethel was going crazy, just like the African elephant. They were satisfied that she was adjusting. But all that time, she had been plotting her getaway.

Bit by bit she heard the scraping sound of brick against brick, that told her that success was possible. When the wall said no, her heart said yes, and she thought of her new baby, whom she had decided would be Kiboko, and of Mobutu, and her mother back in the warm rivers of the Upper Nile.

Finally, with one enormous push, she broke through the wall, rushing through it like a nose guard, sending a crack through fifty feet long

down the length of the wall. A few loose bricks fell and hit her on the head, but, they didn't do much.

Mtumba led the toddling calf Kiboko through the wall, across the yard, down the brick pathway, across a parking lot, and into the cold waters of Lake Ontario. Kiboko held onto his mother's stubby tail with his maw, while Mtumba paddled slowly, slowly, slowly across the harbor and beyond the breakwater, and out into the open water of the great lake.

The zoo dispatched a coast guard cutter to intercept the escaping animals, but it was dark, and naturalists assured police that no animal could swim across forty miles of open water, in the dark, and survive. In any event, police already had their hands full, as Zapiti and the other two elephants, the rhinoceros couple, and three crocodiles had their escape along with Mtumba, in other directions.

This happened in the spring of 1929, in the place known as Buffalo, New York. When alerted, Canadian authorities promised to keep a lookout for the runaway hippos. But as word spread, people began to object. What are we, the dogcatchers of the Yankees, Canadians asked? Parliament met to debate the issue. While game wardens and customs officers watched on, legislators worked to decide whether Mtumba and Kiboko were in fact runaway property, or whether

they were not in fact political refugees, seeking sanctuary in the land to the north.

In the end, Mtumba won, in so small part because of the reluctance of the good people of Canada to pass up a chance to make the United States look like jerks. But Canada did not stop there. The government decreed that henceforth the hippopotamus was a free agent throughout the provinces and northern territories of that country, and could pass unhindered wherever it may choose to go. Two hippos from Canadian zoos-- Elmer in Vancouver, Buddy in Toronto, and Delores in Montreal, were freed, and escorted to a breeding ground on the prairies of Saskatchewan, where they joined Mtumba and Kiboko in freedom.

Mtumba's journey is a landmark event in the history of Canada. It explains the statute of a baby hippo, with a maple leaf emblazoned on its brow, on the lawn in front of the City Hall in downtown Ottawa. It explains the face of Mtumba on the \$500 dollar bill issued by the government since 1948, and the 21 cent first class postage stamp featuring the faces of both Mtumba and Kiboko. If Canada meant freedom to the hippo, the hippo meant identity and character to Canadians everywhere.

The hippos of Canada came to be called the people of Kiboko. But none forgot the heroic

escape of Mtumba, and all have honored her memory in the days since.

Mtumba and Kiboko and the other hippos lived happily ever after, and prospered, under the endless skies of western Canada. Winters were cold, but the creatures adapted, some growing their hair long, others spending the long months of winter inside the compound built for their comfort.

And in the summer, they swam in prairie lakes, and it was as if nothing had changed. All the hippos lolled in the sun, and turned their bodies slowly in the waters, feeling the bubbles rise from their skin, as Kiboko had done many years before, in the muddy waters of the Nile.

Albrecht the Not Altogether Pleasant Little Mouse

There once was a little mouse named Albrecht. And while Albrecht was not an outright wicked little mouse, he had bad habits, and had no intention of correcting them.

He wouldn't brush his teeth. Even when his mother put the toothpaste right on the brush for him and told him to brush, Albrecht just stared at it.

"What's the matter?" his mother would ask.

"I'm just not in the mood," Albrecht would answer her.

He liked to pick his nose and stick the boogers on the wall next to his bed. It was like a map, in which every booger stood for a major city, like Paris or Berlin.

Or a constellation of stars in the night sky. Though what the constellation was (a zebra standing at a cash register?) was by no means clear.

His mother was horrified when she discovered all the crusty little dots sticking to the wall.

But Albrecht did not care. All that mattered to him was that he got the boogers out of his nose.

Sure, he could have used a tissue, like civilized little mice. Albrecht was kind of a little stinker, basically.

Worse, he pooped in the sugar bowl. These weren't "accidents," like anyone can have from time to time. These were on purpose. He waited until everyone was gone, then climbed up on the kitchen table and did his business. He liked when his mother or father dipped a spoon into the sugar and saw the offending lumps. He felt he had accomplished something.

His father, a busy and emotionally distant mouse, told his mother, "Why don't you do something about that little mouse? This is starting to get on my nerves."

His mother, a good, hard-working mouse who had no choice but to leave Albrecht alone every afternoon to run errands, was aghast. This was not the sort of thing pleasant little mice did. And she could not think what provoked Albrecht to such a dastardly deed.

"Why don't you use the toilet like other little mice?" she wanted to know. "I know you know how to."

"I guess I wasn't in the mood," was all Albrecht would say.

Albrecht liked storing cheese in his underwear drawer. He stored quite a good deal of it there, and it got very smelly and very moldy.

Now, this violated every canon of good manners, because it made his underwear smell like sharp cheddar, which was hardly conducive to proper social development. The other little mice at mouse care would wrinkle their noses when Albrecht came by.

"There goes Stinky Cheddar Pants," one of the crueller little mice said, and the nickname stuck.

Albrecht's father, who was gone a lot on business trips, sat the little mouse down for a mouse-to-mouse talk. He talked about the importance of good grooming, and the value of making a good impression on others.

"See, if you just act like a weird little mouse, who's going to want to do business with you? They won't see you as the fine young mouse I know you to be. All they'll see is a smelly little mouse with gunk hanging from his teeth."

To the father, that seemed like a perfectly compelling argument. But Albrecht just yawned. He was in no mood to change his ways just to please other people.

One day, while his father was away on business and his mother was busy running errands,

Albrecht was in his room engaged in his favorite activity, sticking crayons in his ears.

This was another bad habit, because a crayon can puncture a young mouse's eardrum, and make a mouse deaf. Not a good outcome at all.

But you know Albrecht -- he never listened, so why would he want to hear? He did what he wanted to do, and disregarded good advice.

He had got a purple crayon in his right ear, and a burnt sienna crayon in his left, when he heard -- just barely, on account of the crayons in his ears -- the doorbell.

"Oh, what is it this time," said the exasperated, smelly little mouse with bad teeth and crayons in his ears.

But when he opened the door, a big yellow cat named Eddie swiped him with one swift paw, and gobbled poor Albrecht up.

It really wasn't fair. Eddie smelled Albrecht miles away.

Sometimes, child, we forget that rules are for our own good.

Anyway, it was extremely sad. The father mouse felt it was his fault for being away on business so much. "I never really spent much time with

Albrecht," he said to himself. "And after a while, I really didn't want to."

The mother blamed herself. "What good is it to buy the groceries if there is no little mouse to cook them for?"

The two spent many evenings by the fire, thinking about Albrecht and what he really needed.

After a while, they were lucky enough to have another little mouse, whom they named Estelle. And they raised Estelle differently than they raised Albrecht.

The mother did not leave Estelle home alone, ever. And the father made trips less frequently, and did more things with her.

When Estelle did something wrong -- like peeing in the bathtub -- the mother lifted her up and covered her tummy with kisses.

"No matter what a naughty little mouse you are, I will always love you," she said.

And when Estelle put maple syrup in her father's best shoes, he just laughed.

"What a wonderful idea," he said, putting down his newspaper. "Let's make waffles."

A Frankenstein Christmas

It was the night before Christmas, and there was no busier person in all the world than jolly Saint Nick. The long months of preparation for tonight were over. His bag was loaded, the sleigh was idling outside, the reindeer were champing at their bits, eager to get going.

"You know my dear," Nick said to the lovely Mrs. Nick, who sat in her rocker, working on her needlepoint, "tonight I think the deer and I will break our personal best time -- 10 hours, 18 minutes, 57 seconds, set in 1947."

"Yes, dear," Mrs. Nick said, and bit the thread with her teeth.

"The sled has been rebuilt, the deer are in terrific shape with that new high-protein chow we got in Sweden, and with this great new quartz watch, I can tell the time in twenty different zones around the world."

"Yes dear," said Mrs. Nick.

"And look at me," Nick said, patting his immense round belly.

"Why, I'm fit as a fiddle and ready for love. Oh, ho ho ho ho --"

Suddenly Nick pitched forward, his face as red as a berry, and his eyes grimacing with pain. "My pills -- on the mantle!"

"Oh, Nick," said Mrs. Nick as she shook a pair of nitroglycerine tablets out of the little brown bottle, "I've told you you had to lose some of that flab. You're not a young elf anymore, you know. But oh, no, not you. Honestly!"

Nick knew it was true. He was not 300 any more -- 500 was long behind him. He should be slowing down, or taking better care of himself. All that fruitcake, pfefferneuse, and plum pudding had taken its toll of his waistline. Cholesterol? Nick shuddered.

Then he grew very sad, as he thought about the children around the world, expecting his visit tonight. All those stockings hung, all the letters written, all the dreams and hopes of toys. It would be the first Christmas he missed!

Nick called his elves together. They stood around in the Nick living room -- where they were seldom allowed -- and looked at one another apprehensively. "I'm afraid I have some very grave news for you," he said.

"You're -- you're letting us go?" one asked. "On Christmas Eve you're letting us go?"

A lot of ugly things were said before St. Nick hooshed them quite. "No, no, no, nothing like that. The problem is that I can't deliver the presents tonight. Doctor's orders." Nick eyed his wife sheepishly.

Most of the elves shrugged and made for the door. Morale had not been good at the Pole for several seasons -- things had gotten so commercial, and what with the lousy economy, Nick had had to outsource a lot of toymaking to sweatshops in Pacific Rim countries. So a lot of the elves took this bad news in stride.

But not one elf, whose name was Clark. Clark had worked hard making destroyer rayguns all summer and fall, and the idea that no kids would ever get pleasure from these toys really burned his cookies. The other elves gathered around the stove to talk shop, but Clark wasn't in the mood. He bundled himself up and went for a walk down by the bay.

A gentle snow was falling on the glistening waters, and the stars overhead twinkled like Christmas lights that now, only he would see. Suddenly, he saw a plume of spray out in the water, and as he watched, an immense killer whale surfaced, its black flanks and white stripe gleaming in the moonlight. The whale was nudging a huge chunk of ice, pushing it toward the shore.

As the whale pushed the ice onto dry land, Clark gasped. Inside the ice he could make out the features of some deformed, dead, two-legged creature!

"Help! Help!" Clark called, and when the other elves came running they hoisted the chunk of ice onto a sled and hauled it back into the elfhouse, propping it next to the fire. All the elves clustered about in awe as the ice melted around the hideous face and figure underneath.

The elves shook their heads at the creature's clothes. He wore torn green pants, a purple sport jacket that was about three sizes too small, and a dirty black shirt. The elves, who bought their clothes by mail order, and prided themselves on their tailoring, were appalled.

And they all gasped when one eyebrow twitched, the gray nose wrinkled itself, and the monster's eyes opened wide!

Frankenstein looked down at all the little men. A sudden feeling of confused, barbaric rage overtook him. He remembered being chased over the ice floes by hostile villagers with torches. The ice cracking under his feet. His plunge into the icy blue waters. his frozen body carried northward by the frigid currents. And now -- elves.

"Rrrr!" Frankenstein flailed his limbs and them and sneered. All the elves took about ten tiny steps backward.

"I think we have to tell Nick about this," Clark said.

"I'm not telling him," said one Elf, whose name was Stinky, who was not very popular. "You tell him."

"Very well," Clark said, "I will."

Mrs. Nick let Clark in, but cautioned him not to get Nick excited.

"Uh, Boss, we have a certain, uh, problem here," Clark said.

"Can't it wait, Clark?" Nick was beside himself. "Can't you see how miserable I am."

"But ... but ... but ..."

"If only there were someone who could take my place," Nick said. Mrs. Nick wouldn't have any part of it -- the truth is, she hated Christmas, and she wasn't nuts about kids, either. The elves? Little people could be so -- irresponsible. "I've been wracking my brains," Nick said. "Who? Who? WHO!?"

Clark swallowed hard, then spoke up. "Nick, you may think this is a crazy idea, but --"

Suddenly, Frankenstein barged through the doorway, but tripped over the lower half of the Dutch door, and did a stiff-legged double

somersault before landing, wide-eyed, in Nick's lap.

"Ahh!" said Nick.

"Ahh!" said Frankenstein.

They came from different worlds, and yet, the jolly old elf with the can-do attitude took o

ne look at the misbegotten , hitherto evil monster. And he thought he saw something -- a spark, perhaps, that, if nurtured and cared for, could be fanned into a raging storm of goodness. Call it intuition, call it a crazy hunch, but Santa saw in Frankenstein someone he could do business with.

"Hello, my friend," Nick said kindly. "And a very, very merry Christmas to you.

When Frankenstein saw the love and sympathy in the sweet old elf's eyes, something snapped in him. His restless, violent soul sagged. A new feeling, of belonging, and trust , overtook him. In his mind he made himself a promise -- to do anything this wheezing old man wanted.

"Martha," Nick called over to his wife, "I think I've found my man."

"Yes, dear," Mrs. Nick said, and bit her thread.

Nick told Frankenstein what he needed done, and handed him the long computer printout of every

child, his/her address, what he/she wanted for Christmas, and whether he/she had been naughty/nice.

"Here's my watch," Nick said. "You have all night, but you must be done before dawn. " Then he handed Frankenstein something very, very special -- his magic sleigh lash. "Use this to get the deer up," he said. "This was given me 700 years ago by the Bishop of Wroclaw, in a game of poker. It has never failed me."

He stole a glance to where Clark and Mrs. Nick were sitting. "I'd appreciate it if you keep the bit about the lash to yourself."

"Eh," Frankenstein nodded.

Full of holiday resolve, Frankenstein shook Nick's hand stiffly, and walked out into the blustery night air, toward the deer pen. Frankenstein knew that, if he was to succeed at Nick's challenge, he needed to get the reindeer solidly behind him. One look at him, though, and that's exactly where they went, high-tailing it onto the snowy tundra. Comet, Cupid, Dasher, Dancer -- the whole lot of them. Rudolph was the worst, racing around in frantic circles, bug-eyed and making this horrible skronking sound. That was the last straw. Now he would never be able to deliver the presents for St. Nick. Frankenstein knelt in the snow and began to howl.

Ow-ooo! Ow-oooo!

Frankenstein looked up after a moment of howling and saw a dozen pair of eyes looking at him -- white wolves, lean and hungry, licking their lips. Frankenstein got an idea. He rose, motioned to the wolves to stay right where they were, and went into the barn for a bag of dog chow.

The wolves hadn't had a decent meal in days, and quickly snarfed up the crunchy morsels. Several of the animals sidled up to Frankenstein, bushy tails wagging gently, sniffing his formaldehyde-smelling hand. "Now," he said, "you -- help Frankenstein!"

Hitched together to Nick's dog sled, the ten wolves began to scamper across the snow. "Mush!" Frankenstein shouted, and cracked his long musher's whip. With a jolt the ten wolves lifted up off the ground and began pulling. Within a half hour, Frankenstein and his team had crossed the DEW Line and found the first few huts where the nomadic Indians lived. Frankenstein had the team land while he dropped the appropriate toys by the doors of the huts.

"Hmm -- this easy," he thought.

By ten o'clock, they had serviced all of northern Canada. It was not until they came to the large cities that he began experiencing problems. Chimneys, he found, were an impossibility for a man of his dimensions.

Archways and doorways posed similar problems.

Frankenstein frightened the dogs. In turn, he was frightened by the cats.

For an individual created by electricity, he had a remarkable amount of trouble negotiating the Christmas light cords.

In about every hundredth home, a little child had stayed up late to catch a glance of the beloved Mr. Nick. Frankenstein left that child extra toys, but probably not enough to make up for the cost of the therapy the child would need.

Frankenstein staggered as never before, through New England, the Mid-Atlantic states, the southern seaboard. He was like a monster possessed as he methodically read off Nick's list and left the right toys at the right house.

All that work created a powerful appetite in him. Many households left a saucer with two cookies and a glass of milk for him. But he figured out early that nearly everyone had a raw turkey somewhere in the kitchen. You just had to look until you found it.

The Midwest, the Great Plains -- on and on he went. And yet, his watch told him that he still had hours of travel to do before dawn, the deadline Nick had set. The wolves were going strong, but they were no match for the pace set by the more experienced reindeer. A few seemed tired already.

Just as Frankenstein was polishing off the last street of houses on Bainbridge Island, in the state of Washington, the pack collapsed in the sand, whimpering, their tongues flagging, their tails drooping.

"Ehh!" Frankenstein cried, flapping the magic lash over their heads. But it was no use -- they were tuckered out.

Frankenstein scratched his head. What could he do to keep Nick's promise to the kids of the world? He frowned, and looked out over the waters of Puget Sound.

Suddenly, a trumpeting sound, and the signal spout of the same killer whale that had brought Frankenstein to safety just hours before.

It was uncanny, but there it was.

The whale headed straight toward Frankenstein and ploughed headfirst onto the sandy beach. Frankenstein, not knowing what else to do, struggled onto the top of the huge animal's head, cracked the magic lash in the air, and --

ZOOM!!

The killer whale streaked through the mountain air like a jumbo jet. Toys flew out of Frankenstein's bag and fell mysteriously down, down through the sky, breaking into parcels and heading for the chimneys of individual children.

"Whoopee!" Frankenstein shouted, grinning from ear to ear. But he clapped so hard that his right hand came loose, and hung from his wrist by a thread. Frankenstein's smile vanished.

"Must finish job before sun come up," Frankenstein said, clenching his jaw.

And so he did.

Frankenstein visited the home of every boy and girl in the world that night, led through the wee hours by the careening, cometing killer whale.

And when he made his way back to the North Pole early that morning, Nick and Mrs. Nick looked up, astonished to see him back so soon.

"What in blazes?" Nick wanted to know. "Don't tell me you forgot Texas!"

But Frankenstein had not forgotten Texas, or anywhere. His mission was accomplished, and he handed the bag, printout, and magic lash back to the old elf.

"My stars," Nick said. "Look what time it is. You finished in 10 hours, 18 minutes, and 56 1/2 seconds. You -- you beat my record by half a second."

Nick grew suddenly very quiet, and looked away.

Frankenstein started to pat Nick on the shoulder to comfort him, but remembered his hand had fallen off.

"Nick forget -- Frankenstein have lots of help."

Nick brightened. "Yes, of course. You had help. Mine was a solo act. They are completely different things. Come here, my boy, and let me give you a Christmas kiss!"

Nick and Frankenstein hugged, and the elves, who had gathered outside the window, let up a big cheer.

"Hooray for Frankenstein!"

"Oh, my," Mrs. Nick, said, noticing that Frankenstein's hand was hanging by a thread. "Let me get my needle."

"You know what, dear," Nick was saying. "Next year. perhaps I can share some of the work with Frankenstein again. I'm not getting any younger, and we have no one else to carry on after me. Hey, I know. I'll go on one of those liquid diet and lose some of this jelly from my belly. Maybe get one of those stair-climbing machines and set it up out in my workroom. I'll get back into my old fighting form, and we'll have the best Christmas time ever"

"Yes, dear," Mrs. Nick said, and bit her thread.



The Tooth Fairy Naked At Last

Everyone knows about Santa Claus, and how he lives at the North Pole with his elves without any women at all except Mrs. Santa, and makes toys for all the little girls and boys.

And everyone knows about the Easter Bunny, how he lives in the forest with his bunny friends, coloring eggs and weaving baskets from the branches of the yimyam plant, which is now an endangered species.

But what does any of us know, really, about that other major benefactor of kids? I am speaking of course of the Tooth Fairy.

Every time a child loses a tooth, and places it under the pillow at night, the Tooth Fairy turns up. Somehow he gets into our houses, finds his

way to our rooms, sneaks the money under our heads -- where he gets it isn't our concern -- and then sneaks away without so much as a never-you-mind.

Obviously there is much that is not generally known about this friend to mankind, and it is the purpose of this book to set the record straight, and to recognize this much-overlooked figure.

Who is the tooth fairy? A better question would be, Who are the tooth fairies?, for in fact there are over 10,000 registered tooth fairies in the world, and an additional number of gypsy tooth fairies, thought to be in excess of 5,000, operating without any kind of certification.

I'll bet you didn't know that, gentle reader.

But the original tooth fairy was not always a tooth fairy. In fact, he spent the first 300 years of his career not giving gifts to kids, but breaking into people's houses and stealing teeth they already had in their mouths, and making jewelry from them that he sold at a booth on the Boardwalk in Atlantic City. Fellow name of "Cal."

But one night, this Cal had a dream in which he saw that people -- kids, especially -- had a "thing" about losing body parts, and it wasn't very nice. He made up his mind he would change his ways, and so he did. For the remaining 700 years of his life, he spent every night out collecting the lost

teeth of all the children of the area he lived in, and placing dimes under their pillows.

It was a rough business. He had to fight off competitors, dogs, and dads with baseball bats. Sometimes kids would try to trick him by clenching the tooth firmly in their fists -- prying the fingers apart to get the tooth was always a challenge, until the Tooth Fairy invented the knuckle breaker.

The dimes he got were part of a trust fund set up when his great aunt, who was the goddess of air and mineral rights, passed away. It is said that no matter how many kids lose how many teeth, the tooth fairy will always have dimes.

Twenty seven thousand eight hundred and eleven years ago, the original tooth fairy, Cal, went to live with the angels, in Canada. But not before he created a handbook, a continuing education program, and guidelines of professional ethics for tooth fairies to come.

Today his message has spread around the world, and if some kid loses a tooth and doesn't get a dime, well, it's news to the tooth fairies.

Few people realize that in the United States, tooth fairies are appointed by state legislatures, one per congressional district.

Needless to say, it is a plum assignment, and the list of tooth fairy wannabees is long indeed. Well-

connected people are especially eager to use their influence to break into the fairy ranks, but to no avail. Legislatures are only on the lookout for individuals of sterling character, who are bonded, and who are not squeamish about the ins and outs of oral hygiene.

Tooth fairies are required to attend over 200 hours of basic training at the International Tooth Fairy Academy, Training Center and Research Institute for Orthodontic Commerce in Tierra del Fuego. There aspiring fairies are drilled in the various procedures tooth fairies in the modern world are expected to master.

How, for instance, does the tooth fairy enter the house? The chimney is out, of course -- that market is obviously already cornered. And that is just as well since the new higher-efficiency furnaces have made entry by chimney a virtual impossibility. But that is not our problem, is it, gentle reader.

No, after an exhaustive investigation the Tooth Fairy International Research Center concluded that the best entryway for today's homes is the dryer vent, and that is how tooth fairies usually enter homes, although a few old-timers still bore 38-inch diameter holes through the roof using battery-powered 12-mm portable jig saws. It is said that you can identify a tooth fairy by the lint on his mustache.

Making their way up from the basement to the child's room, sneaking in, making the dime drop, and getting the heck out of there without waking up Mom is the heart and soul of the tooth fairy operation.

Now, you may be wondering, what happens to the teeth? The teeth are all labeled and bar-coded, and then shipped to one of two hemispheric tooth fairy laboratories in Chicago and Cairo. There a team of skilled scientists examine each tooth, calibrating its size and condition, and checking for signs that the previous owner had been flossing and brushing properly.

That part is important, because if you haven't been flossing and brushing regularly, you get a computer printout in the mail, and you are on 6-month probation. At any moment, an investigator could pop in and ask to look inside your mouth. So get with the program, all you kids.

After the teeth are photographed and recorded, they are installed at the Museum of Teeth in Oklahoma City. There visitors can stroll through the exhibits of teeth through the Ages, noting the largest tooth, the sharpest tooth, the yellowest tooth, and strange and unusual teeth, like the bicuspid that looks just exactly like a famous celebrity -- sorry, we are not allowed to name names here.

The Museum of Teeth is open from 10 AM to 4 PM Wednesdays through Fridays, except in summers, when it is closed Tuesdays and Thursdays. It operates under a generous grant by the Proctor and Gamble Foundation, makers of fine dentifrices for eighty years.

The next time you are in Oklahoma City, stop in and see what happened to your baby teeth.

Meanwhile, that is the story of the Tooth Fairy, who he was, how he came to be, and how he created an institution which operates in over 128 countries and appears under the Quotron symbol TFRY on the New York Stock Exchange. It is a story of how one individual, with a bit of grit, elbow grease, and a sock full of dimes, stood up, broke into people's houses, and made a difference.

So the next time you hear some other child pooh-poohing the Tooth Fairy, or saying "it's just Mom and Dad," gentle reader, you be sure and set that child straight. Or you may both be getting a little visit from our legal counsel. Infringement of trademark and libel are serious charges, as I'm sure your parents are aware.

And give those back teeth an extra stroke, for us!

Silverball

Jimmy awoke to feel his mother shaking him. "Come on, Jimmy. Come on, sleepy bones. This is what you get for staying up late watching monster movies."

Jimmy pulled the covers over his head, but Mom kept at him. She brushed the comic books off the bedspread, and helped him slide out of the bed and into his chair. She wheeled him down to the bathroom and handed him his toothbrush.

"So what kind of day have you got planned today," she said over toast and eggs. "Danger, excitement, adventure?"

Jimmy blushed and smiled. "We have a quiz in math," he said.

Mom let Jimmy out at the school door. He pushed his chair away without saying goodbye. "Hey, Wheelie," a boy named Skinner said, "you rolled over my foot. Aren't you going to apologize? Kinda rude not to say you're sorry, don't you think?" Jimmy ignored him.

In math class Jimmy sat at the back of the room. The teacher never called on him there. He watched a girl named Lila in the third row. Lila was short but very smart, and he liked the look in her eyes -- she seemed brave.

At lunch he sat with Everett. Everett had a computer and collected dead bugs. He had a dried up praying mantis in a napkin. Jimmy liked it very much.

When the other kids went to gym, Jimmy sat in the teacher's lounge and did his English homework. He was writing a report on astronauts. He still had a bit of lunch left over -- a stick of string cheese.

The bus left him off at his house, and he wheeled up the ramp his mom had built, with the help of Uncle Fred. He fished the housekey from around his neck and opened the door. Mom wouldn't be home till after dark.

He made himself some cocoa in the microwave and wheeled himself in front of the TV. There was an afterschool special on the rainforest. Jimmy drank the cocoa and nibbled some raisins while he watched.

After the movie a new show came on, called Silverball. It began with a girl walking down the street, and some tough kids came up and started to bother her. The girl started to run, and the tough kids chased her.

Suddenly, out of the sky, came a zooming sound. It dived, and shot past them. The kids looked around, and the girl was gone.

But high in the sky, the girl had her arms around the neck of a new kind of masked hero -- Silverball. Silverball went wherever he liked in his streamlined jetchair. It flew, it dived, it spiraled down, down, down, wherever the handsome hero wanted it to go.

"Are you all right, miss?" the hero asked.

"Yes, yes, I'm fine," she said. "You saved me. Who are you? How did you know I needed help?"

"By day I'm just an ordinary citizen," he said. "You wouldn't think I was anything special to look at me. But at night my stratorocket takes me to the far ends of the universe, assisting the afflicted wherever they may be."

The girl looked deep into the hero's eyes. "How fast does this thing go?" she wanted to know.

"Hold tight, miss," said Silverball. And they sped up, to over 500 miles per hour, the jet engine making a loud hum beneath them. They shot out over the city, out over the farm lands, then veering right, rocketing over the water. They dropped down to about fifty feet of altitude, and roared over the rainforest canopy. Behind them, startled birds flew out of the treetops. The girl held tight around his neck and laughed.

Silverball and the girl flew under the treetops and sailed along from tree to tree, swinging from vines as the moneys looked on, perplexed.

Suddenly, he heard a cry below. It was a boy, about Skinner's age, stuck up to his armpits in quicksand. "Help!" the boy cried.

Silverball swung low, scooped the boy up, and dropped him on dry land. "If you can walk, you should watch where you're walking!" she shouted, and sailed on, up over the trees. He heard a voice, familiar as home, calling his secret name.

"Jimmy?" It was a woman, a lovely lady, holding his coat and lunch bag. Silverball grinned and flew down to see her.

"Jimmy, wake up!"

Jimmy opened his eyes. His mom was standing over him. He was sitting slumped over in his chair. Mom was back from her job. Her coat smelled like french fries.

"What did I tell you about staying up so late last night?" she asked, and brushed the hair from his eyes.

"Sorry, Mom," he smiled bashfully. "But it was the one where they make a wife for Frankenstein."

"Come on, now, I'm going to put you to bed properly," she said, and wheeled him down the hall. "I'll get your toothbrush. You get out of those school clothes."

"Yes, ma'am."

"How was school today? Make any new friends?"

"Everett brought a praying mantis to lunch. Mom, do you think I could collect insects, too?"

"We'll see, dear." She tucked him in and kissed him goodnight.

Jimmy lay awake in his bed, blinking in the dark. Thinking of the girl in math class. Lila, he thought -- tomorrow he would say hello.

The Three Mosquitoes

By Daniele Finley

Once upon a time, there was a family of mosquitoes that lived in an upside down tuna fish can next to a red brick under the back porch of a big house.

There was a mama mosquito named Marsha, a daddy mosquito named Hector, and a teeny tiny baby mosquito that everybody just called Buddy. Buddy was one of a litter of 300 other baby mosquitoes who hatched together and swam as tiny transparent larvae in a pool of stagnant water in an old cracked birdbath.

But never mind all that. Today was a beautiful sunny day, and the three mosquitoes planned a picnic.

Mama Mosquito packed a thermos of ice-cold dog blood, a clotcake with blood icing, some jello salad with red and white blood cells, and a big bowl of scabs to munch on.

Papa spread the checkered tablecloth on a dandelion leaf and they all sat down to eat. "Man, am I starved!" he said.

Just then, the sky darkened, and the mosquitoes heard what they thought at first was thunder. Worse yet, a huge round disk came zooming out

of the sky and crashed into the grass only inches away from them, sending them and their picnic sprawling.

"Martians, run for your lives," cried Papa Mosquito, hiding under a blade of grass.

"No, Hector, it's those awful creatures we saw last week, by the rhododendron," Mama Mosquito said. So huge, she thought to herself -- and so hideous.

Sure enough, three lumbering figures blotted out the sun. "Follow me, Mama and Buddy," said Papa, as he took to the air. "We've got to make way for these things."

But before they could fly to the safety of the drainspout, they were all hit by a giant wet ball of something yucky and minty-smelling. The three mosquitoes tumbled to earth, trapped in the sticky ball.

"Oh, Hector, what is this horrible stuff?"

"By gum I'd sure like to know," said Papa Mosquito.

Buddy shot up into the air, turned himself around, and began to dive, down, down, down toward the unwelcome invaders.

"No, buddy," Papa said, grabbing Buddy in midair by the proboscis, making Buddy do several somersaults before coming to a stop.

"Why not, Papa?"

"Because we're better than that, son," Papa said. "It's all fine and good for these poor brute creatures to stumble onto our picnic. They don't know any better. They're animals. But we are mosquitoes, and those of us in the order diptera must live up to a higher standard. Understand?"

"Oh, I guess so," said Buddy, snapping his claw. "But they were really asking for it."

Mama mosquito beamed. "I'm so proud of both of you." And they all three huddled in a great big mosquito hug.

Buddy said, "Say, I know where there's several drops of rancid milk under the swingset. And half a chocolate chip!"

"Now you're talking," Papa said, winking a compound eye and putting one wing around his son.

"I'll whip up a batch of blood pudding," said Mama. "It won't take but a jiffy!"

And as they flitted home, still trailing threads of sticky gum, Buddy called out, "Are we mosquitoes or what?"

And they had never been happier.