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Wild Life.

They were being hunted. Zalika knew with every fibre of her being that the hunters were nearby. She couldn't see them and she couldn't hear them but she just knew they were there. Zalika was the old matriarch of the group, her skin was wrinkled and her eyes were rheumy but her senses were still sharp with the accumulated wisdom of the ages in her brain. She was leading her little group through the forests of Central Africa westwards towards the coast but already they were behind the main migration. Two young females heavy with their first calves had slowed down the little group. Gentle Suhala had given birth to a stillborn male only hours before but Zalika dared not speed up the pace in case Subira, the other young female had a similar fate in store. She was doing her best, patiently plodding along at the rear of the group, but she was very near her time and could only move slowly. The survival of the little group depended on Subira giving birth to a healthy male.

Anxiously Zalika lifted up her ears and turned her great head around trying to sense where the danger lay. She knew that up ahead the trees came to an abrupt end. A logging company had cut through a vast swathe of the protective forest and there was only open Savannah for at least a days' march. Zalika felt that this would be where the hunters would strike. She moved steadily onwards treading delicately through the undergrowth with the rest of her family strung out in a line behind her. By dawn of the next day they had reached the cleared land. Now she must make a difficult decision. Should they stay and rest in the cool of the trees and begin the crossing in the late afternoon using the safety of the night for protection or should they cross now so as not to get any further behind the main migration. She swung her head to and fro, weighing up the pros and cons of each choice. There was no information to tell her where the hunters were, no smell, nothing. She made her decision. They would go now, the further behind they lagged, the greater the danger.

They were over halfway across when disaster fell. The sun was high in a cerulean blue sky. The ground shimmered in the heat of the African sun. Poor Subira was now at least forty metres behind the last animal in the group. Her breathing was laboured and harsh. Zalicka suddenly lifted her head and flapped her ears. She could hear a whirring sound from the North. As she looked up she saw something glinting in the sky, the reflection of the sun on something man made. She trumpeted her warning and the family scattered heading towards the safety of the trees ahead. Subira stood stock still her body unable to go on any longer. There was the zinging sound of an automatic rifle, then a sharp

agonizing pain in her back leg. She braced herself to run but her legs wouldn't move. She lowered her huge head forward and down trying to drag herself out of the way, but her legs wouldn't obey and she tumbled heavily onto her side with dust plummeting all around her.

The helicopter landed fifty feet away and out tumbled a motley collection of men laughing and clapping themselves on the back. There were two Chinese, each holding the latest model of automatic rifle and looking self-conscious in clean pressed safari suits. Three were Africans in T Shirts and cut off shorts. Lastly there was the pilot a thatched haired Caucasian wearing his base cap back to front. One of the Africans was not laughing. He had a deep frown on his face, barely able to keep the contempt from his eyes. The hunters who had hired him had all the latest gear but had been unable to kill a more or less stationary animal with a clean shot.

'I am well named' he thought sadly - Sivatu - he who was born in a time of conflict. First western civilization had taken vast tracks of his tribe's traditional hunting lands and now eastern investment had pushed up the cost of living so he could scarcely feed his family. 'I am reduced to hiring myself out to these clowns' he thought bitterly. He silently offered his apologies to the grandfather who had taught him to hunt. To track the animal on foot, to kill with one shot only and then to give thanks for the life of the animal, for the food it provided, the fat that could be used for oil, the sinews that could be plaited for rope, the hide for leather. Seizing one of the discarded rifles, he strode angrily towards the distressed animal. Whilst Subira bellowed her agony the other men were already using their sharp knives to hack away at the tissue around her mouth. The two hunters were on their knees exclaiming over the length of her long tusks, seemingly oblivious of her obvious pain. Sivatu sighted carefully and swiftly and mercifully ended Subira's pain.

Contempt for his own part in this brutal massacre swept through Sivatu, and he knelt beside the bloodied animal and asked her forgiveness. He prayed as his ancestors had taught him, for her life and for her dignity. With their grisly job finished and the long beautiful tusks stowed aboard the helicopter, the hunters called out, 'Which way did the herd run? Did you see?' With another murmured apology Sivatu stood, his body knotted in self-disgust. 'They will run that way', he called, pointing to the East. 'Come on then, we can easily get another one before sun down' the hunter shouted, hauling himself into the helicopter. Sivatu turned to go, tears making channels in his dusty cheeks, but as he did so, his eye was caught by a rippling movement along the dead animal's body. Sivatu took his machete and made a quick slicing cut along the animal's belly. The contents disgorged themselves in a stinking heap of white serpentine tubes and a grey viscous lump that seemed to squirm in the bloody mess. 'Please little elephant - please live' he said softly. 'I have brought shame and dishonour to my tribe by today's work. Live for me and restore my pride.'

As the helicopter took off towards the East, Zalika, watching from the safety of a thorn bush heard the distant howl of the hyena and saw the circling vultures above. 'Why had they not moved in,' she wondered. She approached the grey hulk that was Subira warily. Her senses alert for anything out of the ordinary. As she approached she saw a little grey trunk pushing its way out of the bloody mess. With a wriggle and a kick a baby elephant broke free from the protective umbilical sac and stood uncertainly on four little stumpy legs. As he gazed about him, he saw the enormous matriarch towering above him and shivered slightly. His fate still hung in the balance. The herd had new life but his size would make them all vulnerable. At that moment patient Suhala belied her name, and

came out of the bush at a run, all the unrequited love for her still born came to the fore. She lowered her neck and began to lick the baby. He in his turn nestled under her belly and began to suck from her still full teats.

Peeping shyly out from under Suhala the baby gazed with bright inquisitive eyes from unbelievably long lashes at the regal Zalika. Would he be allowed to join the family or be left to the mercy of the bush? At length, Zalika lifted her great trunk towards the baby and blew a gust of foetid breath all over him. The baby lifted his little pipe of a trunk and in a century's old ritual of acceptance whiffled a reply. 'You are called Kitwana' announced Zalika. 'You have been pledged to live.' With this pronouncement she turned around and with Suhala nuzzling little Kitwana along, they moved toward the westering sun.

Introduction to Wildlife.

I often wonder if only we could set aside the cares, doubts and fears that occupy our minds for too many of our daylight hours, I think we might be pleasantly surprised at the miraculous happenings that are going on around us from day to day. For instance, I discovered that we had been adopted by a Blackbird and her two boyfriends. Then there is Brer Fox who comes to sun himself on our garden wall, Starlings who seem to think they own the place, not to mention the sparrows who, it appears, enjoy the sound of their own voice and serenade us from our privet hedge, whether we like it or not!

There is of course, a wider picture, there always has been, since the beginning of time. Lets have a look at it.

Wildlife.

It all began in Eden's garden,
with an apple and a tree,
an act of disobedience
that was handed down to me.

And with it came the Wildlife
the Ravens and the Bees
the Leopard and the Puma,
that lived among the trees.

The Beetle and the Butterfly,
the Tiger and the Ram,
the Camel and the Elephant,
imagine if you can.

The cattle on a thousand hills (i)
the meadows, fields and plains,
the valleys dressed in emerald cloth,
and watered by the rains,

That filled the brooks and rivulets,
the waterfalls and streams,
the rivers and the oceans wide
that made the stuff of dreams.

The Eagle and the Octopus,
the Blackbird and the Bees,
the lion and the Antelope,
yes, our Lord made all of these.

Then there were Monkeys in the treetops,
Pink Flamingoes on the shore,
there were Blenies in the rockpools
and Tadpoles evermore.

Then appeared upon a mountain top
an Ark of grand design,
to usher in the Wildlife,
taste the water and the wine,

But not before the Dove returned,
much to Noah's relief,
to bear a gift, an Olive branch
to free the world from grief.

(i) Psalm 50:10.

Adam April 2014.
Pevensey.

There once was a younger son,
who said "I'll take my inheritance and run.
I'm alright, Jack, I'll never look back,
I'll fill my whole life with fun."

He danced and he drank and he played the field.
A while of a time he had.
Never a thought of those back home,
of his brother and dear old Dad.

One day he awoke to find it all gone.
Not a penny he had to his name.
He hung his head low, got a job feeding pigs.
Wild Life had brought nothing but shame.

"It didn't work out when I had my fling,
I thought I'd be happy and glad.
I realise now, I was living in sin.
I think I'll go home to my Dad".

I feel truly sorry and I'll tell him that.
Maybe he'll forgive me and say
I can work as a hired hand back on the farm.
At least I can try, come what may.

His Father was glad and welcomed the lad,
forgave him and showered him with love.
So if you have strayed, turn around right away
and run back to your Father above.

Brenda Adams
Pevensey Bay.
May 2014.

The True Tale of Spooky Hollow.

It was a warm summer night in Superior Wisconsin and my girlfriend Mary and I had spent a couple of hours trying to sleep without success when I started to tell her of the previous afternoon spent with her grand kids exploring the area and looking for more places to fish.

We had discovered a boat launching park at the mouth of the St Louis river.

There were two long wooden jetties and on the right bank were the ruins of huge loading sheds used to ship out the ore from the local mines. Enormous rusting structures with sheeting that creaked and flapped in the breeze. A place that even in bright sunlight seemed to have a haunted feel to it.

On the left was scrub and reed beds with small stunted trees that formed a bay around one hundred yards across.

It was the water in between that drew my attention most of all. Very very deep due to dredging to allow the ore ships access, it seemed almost bottomless even in the bright light of day, hence my name of spooky hollow.

As I talked about it Mary snuggled closer at my description and then suddenly said let's go and look at it now?

We were prone to do mad things at the drop of a hat, me especially, so it was that ten minutes later we were on our way.

It was only a ten minute drive to the large car park with the boat ramps now part hidden in a swirling river mist that made the place look even more eerie than it had during daylight.

The cavernous metal buildings groaned and seemed to whisper of impending doom.

Armed with a large torch we slowly ventured out on to the right one of the floating boat piers. About two hundred feet long and twelve feet wide they seemed a stable enough platform. Close to the end and shining the torch into the water we could see small fish, nothing over about half a pound, schooling and not at all bothered by the light.

I then made a joke about it being like the scene in Jaws where the shark rips the wooden jetty from the shore and devours the hapless fisherman.

Mary was not amused.

We slowly walked back to the shore, hand in hand, and still slightly spooked by the atmosphere of the place and then went to the second, left hand jetty.

Again we walked right to the end, shining the torch all around and into the water, nervous but, at least in my head, perfectly safe.

We stood at the end, looking at the far distant lights across the bay, and just enjoying the stillness of the night.

It was then, simultaneously, we both suddenly knew we were not alone!

We turned and half expected to see something or someone behind us on the jetty. It was empty!

We looked at each other and tried to verbalise our sudden fear, fear of what though ?

With legs, that suddenly were made of jelly, we started to make our way back to the car and safety.

It was then that we saw it.

First a fin just breaking the surface, and the ripples and whirlpools left by a huge tail. My first thought was Shark! as Mary muttered something like Oh my lord it's going to get us. I shone the powerful torch right at it and then realised it was not a shark but an enormous sturgeon.

I had caught sturgeon up to almost a hundred pounds but this fish made them look like minnows in comparison. Around eight feet long it swam in circles. almost touching the flimsy wooden pier between us and the shore. Prehistoric in looks, with yellow devils eyes, it continued to circle and watch.

It really seemed to be waiting for us to try and get past, daring us to even try.

The torch did not bother it at all, neither did my stamping on to the wooden boards.

We had to make a run for it! We timed our run when the circuits would take it away and the furthest point and we ran.

Safely back on shore. shaking with relief and still astounded at the happening we gathered our thoughts whilst sitting in the safety of our car.

It was then that I had a brilliant idea?.....

OK, just what was the brilliant idea?

Why to catch it of course, I am after all known as Catcher Al.

We hastily drove home, by now it's almost 3 am and I grabbed my fishing poles and tackle, but what bait to use? What did I have to tempt such a monster?

I knew that ideally I should be using a fish bait, the riper the better, as sturgeon are in the main a bottom feeder. No not that sort of bottom lol . I mean it feeds on things on the lake or river bed.

Trouble was I had no such bait, mmmmmmmmm what to do?

The only thing I had was a couple of boxes of lob-worms, what folks in the USA call night crawlers, (a rather apt name as on a dewy or rainy night they can be found on most grassy areas slithering about, looking for a mate).

Thus armed we set forth once again to Spooky Hollow.

I parked the car, nose on, just a couple of yards from the left hand jetty. Headlights ready to shine out over the water.

In the glow of the interior light I set up two of my strongest 14' rods (poles to you folks) baited my largest and strongest hooks with four night crawlers each and cast out into the darkness.

I propped the rods, one on each wing mirror, set the reels to run with the audible ratchet engaged, then sat back in the car with the windows open in order to hear my reels should anything take the bait.

As we sat we talked over the plan of attack. If I did manage to hook the monster I knew I was skilled enough to play it, but landing it was a whole new problem. The best I could come up with was that as the boat ramp was a slowly shelving slope then I could maybe, just maybe, coax the fish into the shallows, prevent it escaping backwards by the use of my huge landing net and finally grab it with gloved hands and somehow drag it ashore? Well it sort of made sense to me.

We sat. we waited, we waited some more and then it happened!

The right hand rod gave a tremor and the reel started tick tick ticking as the line slowly peeled out. Oh MY here we go I thought as I scrambled from the car and slowly and carefully picked up the rod.

The line continued to trickle out and I could now feel the slow and constant pull of whatever monster had eaten the bait.

With hands now shaking with anticipation and fear I engaged the clutch and as the line slowly rose from the water. water dripping from it, I waited until the line was almost taught and leaned back into a solid strike!

The rod arced over and the clutch gave a little line under the pressure of the strike. I started what was surely going to be the battle of my life.

Not so.

After a few splashes and kicks I wound in a very surprised looking rock cod of about a pound and a half. No monster. No record. Only a huge disappointment at what could have been, should have been, but sadly never was.

Ah well, that's why they call it fishing, and not catching lol.

Hope you enjoyed this tale as much as I did actually living it.

Wild Life

(A poem for the under-five's I think. Movement could be encouraged and maybe sounds)

Birds chirp

Elephants slurp

Monkeys chatter

Pigs get fatter

What do bunnies do?

Cows moo

Doves coo

Frogs leap

Tigers creep

What do bunnies do?

Butterflies dance
Scorpions pounce
Eagles soar
Lions roar
What do bunnies do?

Dingoes howl
Skunks smell foul
Fish swim
Dolphins grin
What do bunnies do?
Hedgehogs prickle
Worms wiggle
Swans glide
Hamsters hide
What do bunnies do?

Dormice sleep
Sheep bleat
Salmon leap
Birds tweet
What do bunnies do?

Bees make honey
Parrots are just funny
Owls hoot
Lambs are cute
What do bunnies do?

Sharks bite
Stags fight
Giraffes are tall
Ants are small
What do bunnies do?

I've got a hunch
What do bunnies do?

Bunnies munch
That's what they do!

Sue Lewis
May 2014

Wild Thing

She was drenched with early morning dew which glistened in the rays of the sun. Her pale flesh drank in the liquid like nectar. Her leaves reached out to the pastel blue sky and her petals to embrace the sunshine. Looking at her reflection, in the pool of water from overnight rain she was captivated by her beauty and mesmerized at her perfection. Looking around there were many others bursting into bloom and the meadow was becoming a sea of yellow but her beauty surpassed them all. Of course they were only cultivated daffodils whereas she was a wild thing born in the meadow, raised in the meadow and nurtured in the meadow. Botanists and environmentalists had been amazed at her beauty and dazzled by her spectacular colouring.

"This one's a beauty Sally." The environmental officer had exclaimed to his assistant.

"I'll log it. Keep your hand in the shot for scale and I'll take a picture. Wow! I hope that does it justice. I'll take a couple more."

There had been a lot more to the conversation but clearly they had been wowed by her stunning beauty. Of course, it was obviously only because of her that the meadow had been saved and was to be bypassed and protected.

It was a little disconcerting that this year the meadow was being used to graze cattle. Of course they were not stupid animals and would not attempt to make her part of their diet. Similarly they would surely avoid trampling on her when they saw how stunningly beautiful she was. She was rather concerned that one was grazing a little too close – ah, but then it turned to avoid her.

"Pphwwrrpp. splat, splatter, splat."

"Oh my goodness! Help, help I'm being buried.....!" she spluttered as she was engulfed.

The whole meadow erupted into laughter and swayed with joy as the narcissistic narcissus was buried under a huge cowpat.

Terry Page 2014

[WILD LIFE]

WHAT SHALL I WRITE ABOUT?

Wild life is the subject we've been asked to write this time.
So, I've sat and racked my brains, helped along by a glass of wine.

Do I tell them of my wild, wild life when I misbehaved in my teens?
The Sixties, hippie flower power and wearing kaftans over jeans.

Can I still call myself a wild thing when I'm doing one hundred and two
When hurtling down the highway, hoping there's no police cars anywhere in view.

Or, do I go for big wild lions that roam around every African Park,
That bump off deer in the daytime and scrunch them up after dark?

How wild would you call a hairy spider marooned in your kitchen sink?
Pretty mad, I'd say he'd be, he only climbed in there for a drink.

Seagulls, they're arrogant and noisy, you really couldn't call them wild,
When they've got enough confidence to nick a bag of chips from a child.

How about that tiny fly, strutting on my worktop with its dirty feet and all?
To me it doesn't qualify, so I swatted it as it started walking up the wall.

Hedgehogs are still wild, although known as 'The Gardener's Friend,'
But pick one up at your peril, they're prickly and carry fleas from end to end.

Urban foxes plunder bins and bags looking for any discarded treat.
Country foxes raid hen houses, much preferring fresh caught poultry meat.

The rhino is large, fearsomely wild and coloured a single shade of grey.
If it decides not to be your movie star, run like hell to get out of its way.

There are great big gorillas in the forest, sat up in the highest tree.
Would they get wild when they learn that they're related to you and me?

And, what about those desert meerkats, so cheeky, squeaky and small,
How would they feel about their TV relatives selling insurance to us all?

And then there's those jungle parrots coloured green, blue and red?
They'll never learn to say "Pretty Polly," just bite your finger off instead.

So, I think I'll just sit here and give 'Wild Life' some thought and time.
Dammit, now I've got writer's block...hello, you nice glass of wine.

Elizabeth Wright 2014

[WILD LIFE]

THE EMPTY NEST

A true story

The wooden bird box hangs empty on the wall, the brown exterior turned golden by the setting sun. I try to peer inside the tiny entrance hole, desperately looking for a glimpse of delicate primrose and blue feathers, strain to hear the contented cheeping of well-fed baby birds. But today there is only silence. I'm an empty nester. Today, my three babies have all flown.

Four years ago we hung a blue tit box on the garden wall facing the conservatory. Although it looked inviting and was thoroughly inspected by various pairs of birds, it remained unoccupied.

This year, having just returned from a two week holiday, as I began hanging clothes on the washing line, I heard tiny cheeps coming from inside the bird box. The little chorus was swiftly followed by loud scoldings from an irate cock blue tit perched on my TV aerial. He made it quite clear he did not like his space being invaded. To back up his angry chattering, he flew down onto the garden fence and bravely gave me another furious telling off.

I love birds so I couldn't help saying "Its all right, little fellow, I'm not going to hurt your babies." He was joined by his mate, who looked as if she could have done with a good top-to-toe feather makeover. Her plumage had obviously become ruffled and ragged sitting on eggs and feeding hungry youngsters.

A wriggling grub was held in her beak. World-weary, she gave me a cursory glance, ignored her still ranting partner, and flew towards the box. There were squeals of delight as she popped in with this delicacy. Ten seconds later, out she came and flew off to look for more insects. The cock bird, his authority apparently undermined, stopped scolding, and in a huff, took himself off into next door's garden.

As the days went by and the chicks grew, they would flutter in the nest, testing their wings for exit time. Occasionally a little face would peep out of the hole to look at the outside world. Utterly fascinated, I often sat and watched from my conservatory as the blue tit parents worked non-stop to feed their thriving brood.

If I potted around in the garden, father still gave me a token touch of the verbals from the top of the fence, but mother always ignored me completely and just got on with the work of stuffing assorted grubs into three hungry mouths.

The little voices grew stronger as the chicks developed and I knew it would be only a few days before 'my little family' left the cosy confines of the tit box. I'd really miss them all.

And today I came home and thought it was mum sitting on the fence. Only, on closer inspection, I see it is one of her precious babies. Unfazed by the world outside the nest, unafraid of me, he looks in my direction, and cheeps. I have to say, "What are you doing out little man?" He cheeps again.

I rush inside for my camera; I must have a picture, some permanent reminder of 'my' birdy family. I take snap after snap. I've only got a few chances. Once he flies, he'll be gone. Another cheep. As a bird lover I want to stroke him. He's so tiny I'm afraid he won't last long with so many enemies about. I can't help myself as I offer up an extended finger. He immediately hops on and clings tightly with black matchstick legs, his tiny claws needle sharp.

He looks up at my face and cheeps again, hopefully. He's hungry. My eyes fill with tears. For a few brief seconds I'm touched by this magical moment when a wild creature completely trusts me.

A couple of fluffy baby feathers detach themselves from his soft plumage and drift away, like thistledown, on the breeze. He picks at my fingernail. I have to gently stroke the soft blue head and primrose yellow chest. He appears to enjoy this and the claws prickle as he tries to settle down

and make himself more comfortable on my hand.

A whirr of wings and mum's on the fence with a grub. When she sees that I'm touching one of her babies, she flicks her tail from side to side, a sure sign of annoyance. She scolds and the chick crouches, bewildered. The spell is broken. The precious moment over.

I gently put him back in the box. His siblings start calling loudly. Mum immediately dives in with food, followed seconds later by dad. They start to run a frantic shuttle service of greenfly and grubs to the trio of babies that are now hanging, open mouthed, out of the nest box hole. I know they will soon be gone.

When I check just before sunset, they've flown. But I can hear dad calling to his brood from his perch on the TV aerial. There are reassuring, responsive chirrups from the lilac tree. It's so heavy with leaves I can't see any of the chicks, but they are there. I can only hope they will be all right.

Elizabeth Wright 2014