

Adrian Plitzco

Pirate

The barking Kookaburra

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Chapter 1

A thunderstorm had just passed over the little farm house. You could still hear a faint thunder, rolling up the valley of Tantaraboo. The rain had dumped lots of water onto the backyard with its tiny vegetable patch and dozens of flower pots. The vegetables and the flowers weighed down by heavy water drops looked sad, as if they were crying. But soon they would suck in the water, stand up straight again and look more beautiful than ever before.

Not so the little bird standing between the lettuce and the carrots. It was soaked, its feathers pointing away from its shivering body like crooked needles.

“What the blooming tail is it, mate?” Buddha asked. Buddha was the black cat who knew almost everything. He knew instantly what kind of baby bird it was he was looking at. But he pretended not to know, because he wanted to tease the dogs. The dogs would not know the answer, Buddha knew that. In his opinion dogs knew nothing and they definitely were stupid.

“I don’t know,” Hoover answered. Hoover was the neighbour's dog. “But it looks like lunch to me,” he quickly added and leaped forward, his mouth wide open. Just before his fat paws would crush the little bird, Ajax unexpectedly made a dart for the bird, picked it up and threw it into the air.

“It's a great toy,” Ajax said. Ajax was the other neighbour’s dog. He wagged

his tail, swayed his bottom back and forth, ready to jump and catching the bird midair. Ajax was not aware of Stelze sneaking up on him from behind. Stelze was the dog who belonged to the farm, like Buddha, the cat. She placed her big paw on Ajax's tail as he jumped.

"Ouch!" he yelped and fell flat onto his snout.

"It is not lunch and it is not a toy," Stelze said with her deep and firm voice.

With a splish-splash the soaked bird landed on her snout.

"It's a baby bird," she now said as softly as she could.

Buddha rolled his eyes. "It's a kookaburra, mate. They are birds you only find here in Australia and also in New Guinea. They eat fish, frogs, lizards and snakes."

"Yuk!" Ajax said, shaking his head.

"Yum!" Hoover said, licking his lips.

Buddha started to yawn. He seemed to be bored with lecturing the dogs about Australian bird life. But looking closer you could see that he enjoyed it.

"Yeah, mate," he concluded, "it is a bloody kookaburra."

"It's a baby," Stelze said again, her eyes crisscrossing, trying to focus on the kookaburra sitting on her snout. Stelze was a very tall dog. Her legs were longer than the longest stilts. And because she was a Doberman dog of German origin, her name was Stelze, the German word for stilts. She actually was not as stupid as Buddha liked to portray her. She was an old dog and her life had taught her a lot of valuable lessons. She was smart and wise. She knew what was bad for her and she knew what was good for others. She had a big heart for all creatures of the world. "Do you have a name?" she asked the kookaburra as gently as possible so she would not scare it.

"Pirate," the kookaburra peeped, his eyes wandering from Hoover to Ajax and back to Buddha.

Stelze could sense that Pirate was a bit scared. "Don't worry about them, Pirate," she said. "They are my friends. They won't do you any harm. Ajax just loves to play. Hoover is always hungry and just eats anything that has flavour. But by now they know that you are neither a toy nor a sandwich." She looked at

Ajax and Hoover with stern eyes. "Don't they?"

Ajax and Hoover nodded.

"And Buddha is not interested in birds. He's too busy telling us dogs how stupid we are. Am I right?"

Buddha did not even look up. He rolled his eyes and yawned once more.

"I am Pirate," Pirate said again, now more proudly.

"And you look like one too," Ajax and Hoover said at the same time.

Pirate indeed did look like a pirate. All around his left eye, in a perfect circle, grew black feathers. At either end there was a thick line of black that went all around his head. It looked as if he wore a black eye patch, like real pirates do.

"But I am sure he is not as naughty as real pirates are," Stelze said. "After all he is still a baby. He can't fly yet."

"I am not a baby. I am the most dreaded pirate in the world", Pirate said, puffing up his chest. "All the creatures in the bush fear me. Watch out for me! Or I will come and give you a hiding until you beg for your life. And I can fly." He flapped his soaked wings, splashing the water into Stelze's eyes. She instantly closed them and bit her tongue so she would not growl. Ajax, Hoover and Buddha burst out laughing.

"Stelze hates water," Ajax shouted.

"That's your first shower for years. It was about time," Hoover screamed.

"Why are your ears so big?" Pirate asked and jumped onto the top of Stelze's head.

"They're her bed," Hoover quickly said. "She uses the left ear as her mattress and the right one as a blanket."

"No, they're her wings," Ajax joked. "Watch out, she'll fly away any minute."

"She might give you flying lessons," Hoover added.

Pirate was jumping up and down on Stelze's head. "You are funny," he said, peeping wildly in between. "You make me laugh."

"Kookaburra's laughter sounds different to me, mate," Buddha said. "Their laughing call is raucous and crazy."

“Yeah, you're right,” Ajax and Hoover agreed. “When kookaburras laugh it sounds like a bunch of monkeys having fun.”

“Why don't you laugh like a real kookaburra, mate?” Buddha asked.

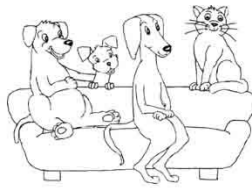
Pirate went quiet all of a sudden. He stopped jumping, his wings now hanging down from his tiny body as if they had become too heavy to ever spread again. “I don't know,” he said.

“Where is your home?” Stelze asked, her eyes rolling, trying to catch a glimpse of Pirate sitting on top of her head.

“I don't know,” Pirate answered.

“How did you get here without flying?” Buddha asked.

“I . . . I don't know.”



Chapter 2

In the evening, after Ajax and Hoover had gone back to their own homes and Buddha was on the roof top watching the stars, Stelze lay down on her couch out on the veranda. Pirate quickly curled up between her long legs and fell asleep in an instant. His feathers were now fluffy and shiny, his stomach full. Because everybody insisted, Buddha had agreed to share his dinner with Pirate.

“Kookaburras don’t eat dog food. They eat fish. It was *you* who said that,” the dogs had lectured him.

Pirate loved it. He sunk his strong beak into the mushy fishy bits and swallowed them as if there was no tomorrow. Earlier in the evening Stelze had wondered where Pirate could sleep tonight. Maybe she would lift him up onto the lowest branch of the gum tree in the backyard. But she quickly dismissed the idea. What if a feral cat sneaked up on him and grabbed him? She thought about scratching some leaves together to build a nest under the house. But what if a snake sneaked up on him and bit him? Pirate had to sleep on the couch, between her legs.

Stelze did not take her eyes off him. At one stage she tried to hum a song she heard once on her master's radio. She thought that would comfort Pirate. But Buddha was yelling down from the roof top:

“Hey, mate! Your howling gives me the shivers. Are you trying to scare us all to death?”

So she stopped humming and instead licked Pirate's feathers clean, gently and carefully.

“How is he doing?” all of a sudden Hoover asked.

“Holy bone!” Stelze whispered. “You gave me a fright. What are you doing here so late at night?”

“I couldn't sleep. So I asked myself why don't you wander up here and see how Pirate is doing.”

“He is doing fine. He's asleep.”

“Poor thing”, Hoover sighed and rested his snout on the couch, very close to Pirate.

“You're not trying to snatch him away from me, are you?” Stelze growled.

“No! No! No!” Hoover insisted, “I'm not eating my friends. Friends are for life. You have to treat them with love and care.”

“That's something I have never heard coming out of your brain before. Who told you that?”

“I did, mate,” Buddha yelled from the roof top.

“Well”, Stelze sighed, “Pirate is indeed a poor thing. It must be hard for him not to be with his parents.”

“Perhaps he doesn't have any. Where he comes from there are no such things as parents,” said Hoover.

“What a lot of offal! Where do you think he comes from?” Buddha yelled from the roof top.

“From outer space!” It was Ajax's voice.

“Holy bone,” whispered Stelze. Her heart was pounding.

“Holy lunch,” whispered Hoover, pulling his tail between his legs.

“You gave us a fright,” said both.

“I couldn't sleep. So I asked myself why don't you wander up here and see how Pirate is doing,” said Ajax and jumped onto the couch. “Hey, listen! I have the proof that Pirate is from outer space. Do you remember the thunderstorm this afternoon? Do you remember the lightning? Well, that wasn't lightning. It definitely was not. I mean it was kind of a lightning. But in fact it was the engine of a UFO. It sends out a bright light, as a disguise, so you can't see that it is a UFO.”

“UFO!” Buddha yelled down from the roof top. “There aren't any UFO's.”

“Yes there are,” Ajax insisted.

“Mate, it is scientifically not proven,” said Buddha. “And who knows better than me that they do not exist? I have been watching the night sky all my life and have not seen a single one so far.”

“Will you guys shut up,” Stelze interfered. “Your stupid argument will wake up Pirate.”

“Well, he definitely fell out of the sky,” Ajax now said quietly.

“He’s right,” Hoover agreed. “And we only first saw him after the lightning. Maybe it was a sorcerer or a wizard who brought him here. He performed magic with his wand. They have sort of a flashing light, haven’t they? Maybe Pirate was originally a flower.”

“Or a rock,” Ajax suggested.

“Or a worm,” said Hoover.

“Oh you dogs are so stupid. It makes my claws cringe,” Buddha yelled down from the roof top. “There are no UFO's and there are no sorcerers. Get it, mate?”

“Oh yeah, Mister Know-It-All. Do you have a better explanation why he's here?” Hoover and Ajax asked.

“Not yet, mate. I'm still thinking about one. That little bird didn’t come from a different planet.”

“No, he comes from the furthest star away,” said Ajax. “From the edge of the universe.”

“Hang on,” Hoover interrupted. “Since he’s a pirate he must have arrived on a huge pirate ship.”

“A schooner that would be,” Buddha corrected him. “A pirate’s ship is called a schooner. It was the pirate’s favourite ship in the Caribbean. . .”

“Let's stop right there,” said Stelze. “We will find out where Pirate comes from and we will take him back there. But right now he needs to sleep. He still is a baby.”



Chapter 3

The next day, long before the first sun beams hit the couch on the veranda, Pirate woke up. He did not open his eyes yet. He felt the warmth and the softness of Stelze's legs around his body and snuggled up to them, one last time. He felt so comfortable that a deep sigh came out of his beak, from deep down in his belly. Finally he jumped up like a spring and hopped onto Stelze's forehead.

“Wake up!” he peeped. “Let’s play.”

Stelze did not hear him. She was still snoring.

Pirate looked around. What he saw seemed strange, but at the same time very familiar to him: the backyard with its tiny vegetable patch and dozens of flower pots; the gum tree in the far corner; the veranda with its sun bleached timber decking; the couch with its ripped cover and Stelze. Somehow Pirate felt a bit strange about himself too. He couldn't really say what it was that made him feel safe being around Stelze. She definitely was not a kookaburra, or any other bird. However her ears were as big as grown up kookaburra wings. Pirate could not imagine that Stelze would ever manage to fly with them. They were too fluffy. He took a good grip with his claws on Stelze’s forehead and leaned forward. He stretched his neck as far as he could and grabbed the tip of Stelze's ear with his beak. He lifted it up. It was very hard work. The ear was heavy and Pirate had to step backwards, at the same time making sure he did not fall off. It cost him a lot of effort and he surely was losing strength. Soon his beak could not hold onto it any longer and he let go. Stelze's ear slipped back like a wet towel falling off a rack and landed over her eyes with a slap. That looked too funny. It made Pirate laugh, but all that came out of his throat was a weird and squeaking sound.

Compared to Pirate’s beak, Stelze’s mouth was an odd shape and texture. Pirate’s beak was pointy, hard and strong. Stelze’s mouth was round and the

skin as soft as the feathers under a bird's wing.

"How does she catch a worm with that?" Pirate asked himself, pulling her lips. Both claws pushing firmly against Stelze's snout he used all his strength and stretched the gummy lip almost over his head. There was this hollow smack, like the sound of a popping cork, as the lip flicked back and Pirate fell backwards, landing on his bottom.

"Ouch!"

Stelze opened her eyes.

"What happened?" she asked, "did you hurt yourself?"

She pulled her tongue over Pirate's chest, licking away some dust stuck between the feathers. Pirate thought it was a funny game.

"Yeah!" he shouted and surrendered himself to the tickling of the tongue. He squealed and shrieked and thought this was sheer bliss. Stelze's tongue made its way up to his head. Pirate, still on his back and his legs helplessly kicking the air, stared at the huge tongue hovering above his face. It was as wet as a dripping facecloth.

"No!" he yelled.

But it was too late. The tongue landed on his face with a smack like a whale's splash into the ocean. It buried him under its warm and spongy flesh. Pirate held his breath.

"Yuk! Yuk!" he choked as the tongue slid over his beak and eyes, leaving a soaking trail of dog's spit.

"Having a morning bath, mate?" Buddha said amused as he placed himself on the couch's arm rest.

"Babies are all the same," said Stelze. "They don't like to be washed."

"I am not a baby anymore," Pirate insisted. "I am the most dreaded pirate in the world."

Ajax jumped onto the veranda. He was panting:

"I did it. I have won. I am first again. Great. Absolutely fantastic. Nobody beats me. I am the fastest dog in Tantaraboo. Good morning, everybody."

Shortly after, Hoover jumped onto the veranda. Rather, he dragged himself

up. His tongue was hanging out of his mouth and nearly touching the ground.

“I nearly won”, he panted, “I nearly won by the skin of my teeth. But, at least I came second. That’s pretty good. Good morning, everybody.”

“How can anyone be so brainless,” said Buddha, rolling his eyes. “Speaking of brain, I thought last night about our strange fellow Pirate. The fact that he does not know where his home is and how he got here means that he is suffering amnesia.”

“Ahm . . . what?” the dogs asked.

“Amnesia,” Buddha repeated, “Am-ne-sia.”

“Is that the name of the UFO he travelled with?” Ajax asked.

“It is the name of the planet he comes from,” Hoover corrected him.

Buddha threw his front legs over his head.

“Amnesia is the medical term for loss of memory. Pirate can’t remember a thing. It’s like he has an empty wall in his head. Someone or something has taken off the pictures. They’re gone. He’s lost them all.”

“I haven’t lost anything,” said Pirate. “I’ve never had anything anyway.”

Buddha pointed at him and shouted:

“See what I mean?”

“How can he lose his memory?” Stelze asked.

“Probably got a hefty knock on his head, mate. Or had a bad adventure he prefers not to remember.”

“Did you?” Hoover asked Pirate.

Pirate shrugged his wings.

“Let’s go and search for your memory,” said Ajax. “Us dogs are champions in sniffing things out.”

“Great idea!” Hoover added. “Let’s start in the backyard. It might still be there.”

Buddha raised his voice. You could hear that he now was on the brink of losing it.

“Hold your breath, you . . . dogs! A memory is not a thing hiding under a rock. His memory got lost in his brain, mate. He has to find it himself.”

“As a matter of fact it is a brilliant idea to search for Pirate’s memory”, Stelze now declared. “We will take him on a walk through Tantaraboo. Any tree, rock or creek we’ll come across he might recognize it, and it may trigger his memory. Step by step he will remember where he came from.”



Chapter 4

Their walk took them to the many secret places in the valley of Tantaraboo. At the western end they came across the hollow gum tree. A fire had gone through the area many years ago. The tree withstood the flames. But its core burnt out completely. Now it was hollow. A gap led inside the tree where it offered enough room for three dogs and a cat.

“We call it the cave,” Stelze said to Pirate. “Do you recognize it?”

Pirate shook his head but said:

“A cave! There must be a treasure in there.”

Hoover looked at him in surprise.

“There is no treasure in there.”

But Pirate insisted.

“There certainly is. Every cave has a treasure. Let’s go on a treasure hunt.”

He disappeared through the gap.

“He doesn’t recognize it,” said Stelze. She was disappointed. “He obviously didn’t come through here when he got lost.”

“I didn’t know there is a treasure in there,” Hoover said, still baffled. “I wonder what kind of treasure it could be.”

“A big fat bone, for sure,” said Ajax, wagging his tail.

Hoover pricked his ears. Saliva was dribbling out of his mouth.

“Let’s go and find it.”

Both squeezed themselves through the gap, disappearing too into the cave.

“Wait for me,” Stelze called and rushed through the gap as well.

Buddha stayed back. He shook his head.

“Blooming dogs! They hear bone and instantly lose their mind.”

Inside the cave it was dark. Pirate could not see much. But he clearly heard the dogs sniffing around.

“Pirates, avast! Find the treasure!” he called. “That’s an order.”

“Aye, aye captain!” said Hoover, bumping into Ajax.

“Get your nose away from my bottom,” he protested.

“I can’t smell a bone,” said Stelze. “I don’t think there is one in here.”

“I found it,” yelled Pirate. “I found the treasure. Yo-ho-ho!”

The dogs chuckled as they saw the crooked twig Pirate had picked up from the dusty ground. He proudly held it in his beak.

“It’s a sword. It’s made of gold and silver.”

“Wow!” said Ajax.

“It’s the most beautiful sword I have ever seen,” said Hoover.

“It must have belonged to a king once,” said Stelze.

“Now it’s mine,” said Pirate, brandishing the twig. “Pirates, avast! Look over there. It’s Captain Crook from the ghost ship. He is attacking us. He’s after the sword. Everybody take their weapons. Fight for your life.”

The dogs had given up their hopes of finding a bone. Instead they now enjoyed playing along with Pirate’s pirate play. Stelze danced on her hind legs, wrestling one of Captain Crook’s bloodthirsty buccaneers. Ajax bit them in their legs and made them fall over. Hoover had picked up a stick himself and swung it around, hitting the buccaneer’s heads.

“Take this,” he shouted. “Take that. And this. And that.”

Pirate was the bravest. He fought Captain Crook, piercing the gold and silver sword straight into his heart. But Captain Crook did not cringe. He still stood on his legs with a dirty smirk on his face. “He’s not dying,” Pirate shouted. “He and his pirates are ghosts.”

“They are invincible,” said Hoover.

“The darkness is their protector,” said Stelze.

Ajax suggested it would be best to lure them outside.

“The sunlight will kill them.”

“Follow me,” said Pirate.

He was just about to jump through the gap when all of a sudden a hollow voice from above shouted:

“Booh! Booh!”

Everybody froze.

“What was that?” whispered Hoover.

“A ghost?” Ajax feared.

“I can’t smell anybody,” said Stelze.

“It’s impossible to smell ghosts,” said Ajax. “They don’t reek because they’re dead.”

The hollow voice spoke again:

“It’s me, Captain Crook.”

Everybody was now screaming. Pirate dropped his twig and hid between Stelze’s legs. Hoover pushed himself under Stelze, trying to hide too. And Ajax jumped on top of Hoover, at the same time squeezing himself under Stelze’s belly. Only Stelze had no one she could hide under. She was shaking with fear.

The hollow voice continued:

“I want my sword back.”

Everybody flinched.

“He’s a real ghost,” said Hoover.

“What do we do now?” asked Ajax.

“Someone has to give him back the sword,” said Stelze.

“Not me,” said Pirate.

“Just give me the blooming sword, mate,” chuckled the hollow voice.

“Hang on,” said Ajax. “I think I know that chuckle.”

“It’s Buddha,” said Hoover.

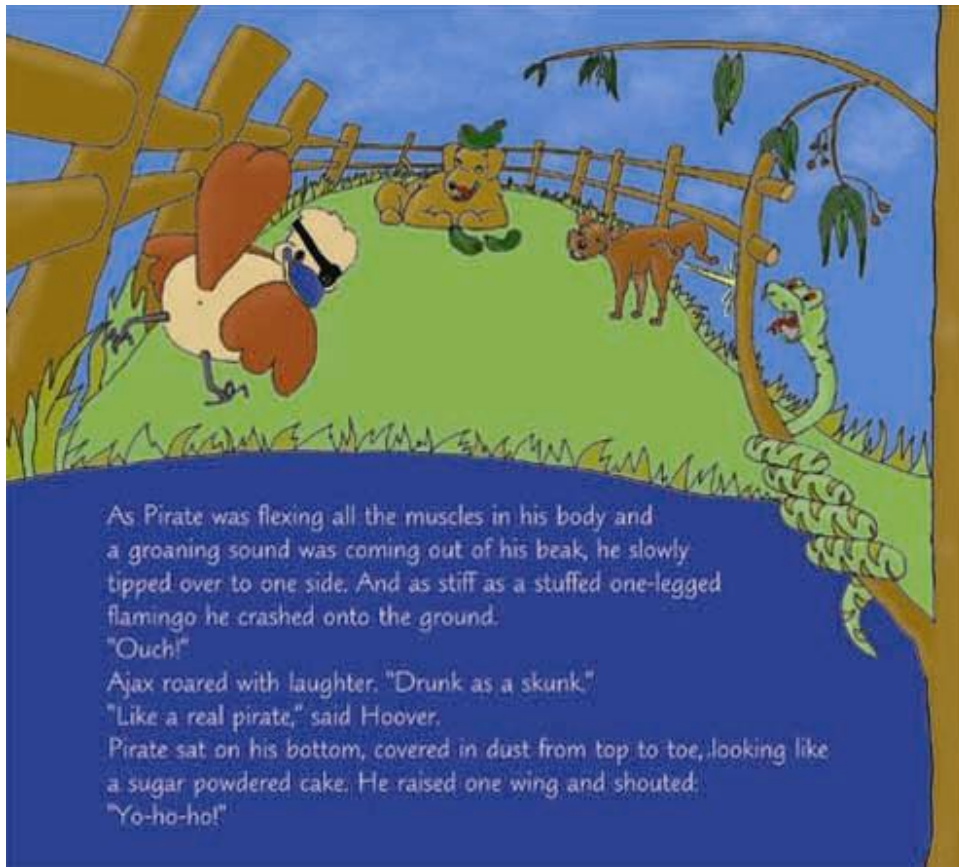
“He played a trick on us,” said Stelze.

Buddha was rolling on the ground with laughter as Pirate and the dogs came out of the tree. Pirate hopped onto his belly, shrieking and peeping:

“I was so scared. That was so funny.”

“I had the best time in my life, mate,” Buddha laughed.

After everybody else had a good belly laugh Stelze suggested walking on to the next secret place. After all they were on a mission. They wanted to find out where Pirate came from. Pirate grabbed the stick. He did not want to leave it behind. It was his treasure. And so they marched on.



As Pirate was flexing all the muscles in his body and a groaning sound was coming out of his beak, he slowly tipped over to one side. And as stiff as a stuffed one-legged flamingo he crashed onto the ground.

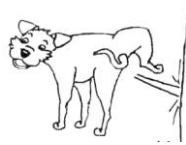
"Ouch!"

Ajax roared with laughter. "Drunk as a skunk."

"Like a real pirate," said Hoover.

Pirate sat on his bottom, covered in dust from top to toe, looking like a sugar powdered cake. He raised one wing and shouted:

"Yo-ho-ho!"



Chapter 5

At the northern end of Tantaraboo they reached the boulder. It was gigantic and had a face. Two horizontal crevices across the top marked the eyebrows. Its hollow eyes below were made out of two dents. Right in the middle of the face sat a big fat bulge. That was the nose. The mouth was a circular hole.

“We call it *The Whistler*”, Stelze said to Pirate. “Do you recognize it?”

Pirate again vigorously shook his head and said:

“But it looks great. Is that Treasure Island?”

“Yes, it is,” Hoover said all excited. He knew that Pirate would come up with another pirate adventure. “I do remember now. I did once hide a bone under it. But I never found it again.”

“That’s what Treasure Island is for,” said Pirate. “For hiding your treasure, so nobody can find it. Let’s hide my sword. Pirates! That’s an order!”

“Aye, aye captain,” Ajax and Hoover said and followed Pirate who had started running around the boulder. All of a sudden he stopped. Ajax managed to stop just in time. But Hoover had not paid attention and bumped into Ajax.

“Get your nose away from my bottom,” Ajax protested.

“Shush! Avast!” Pirate said. “There is a big ship landing on the other side of the island. It’s a schooner full of pirates.”

A bunch of greedy pirates jumped off the ship, shouting and swearing.

“They look very scary,” whispered Pirate.

Hoover was scratching his head.

“What are you talking about? They’re not pirates. It’s Buddha and Stelze.”

“Shush!” Ajax whispered. “Of course they are pirates. They are from Bloodcrust Island. Look at them how bloodthirsty they are. If they find us they

will slit our throats.”

“You’re right,” Hoover agreed. “They do look really scary.”

“They are after my sword,” said Pirate, determined to defend his treasure. “We’ll surprise them. We’ll attack them from two sides. Ajax and I go this way. Hoover you go that way.”

“Aye, aye captain,” said Hoover, chuckling and rubbing his paws. “That’ll be great fun.”

“But watch the crocodiles,” Ajax warned him.

“Crocodiles?”

“Treasure Island is teeming with big fat crocodiles.”

“And lions and tigers,” Pirate added. “And dragons. And monsters.”

Hoover hesitated for a moment but then puffed up his chest.

“No problem. I can handle them.”

“Let’s go,” Pirate ordered. “We attack the pirates on my command.”

Pirate, Ajax and Hoover were crawling around the boulder, trying not to make any noise. Pirate watched out for the wild animals, carefully checking out every corner, gap and crevice in the boulder. He felt safe with his sword of gold and silver and was not afraid of the battle with the greedy pirates. Hoover however on the other side of the boulder tried hard not to burst into laughter. He was too excited by the thought of charging from behind the boulder, roaring like a lion, and giving Buddha and Stelze the biggest fright of their lives. Still, he carefully watched his surroundings. You never knew if there really was a dragon or a monster hiding somewhere.

“Attack!” Pirate shouted and on command the three rushed forward, screaming, yelling, Hoover again chuckling. But Buddha and Stelze were not where they were supposed to be. The spot where they had just been standing was now deserted. They were gone. They had vanished. Pirate, Ajax and Hoover looked at each other puzzled.

“Where are they? Where have they gone?”

That very moment, Buddha and Stelze suddenly popped up from behind the boulder. “Attack!” they yelled and charged Pirate, Ajax and Hoover. All three

got a big fright and ran away like headless chooks. But eventually, after they realized what was going on, everyone chased everyone around the boulder. There was heaps of screaming and giggling and laughing. Pirate had great fun. Hoover snatched his stick, Pirate snatched it back. Buddha tickled him, Pirate poked his leg. Ajax nudged him with his paw, Pirate nipped his tail. Stelze smacked him with her dripping wet tongue, Pirate jumped onto her nose. On and on it went until everybody dropped onto the grass, out of breath and exhausted.

“What about my sword?” Pirate asked. “We still need to hide it.”

Ajax had a funny idea. He shoved the stick into the boulder’s circular mouth. Now *The Whistler* was not whistling anymore. It looked as if it was sucking a noodle. Everybody was rolling on the ground laughing. Except Pirate, he was shrieking.



Chapter 6

Their walk finally ended at the third and last secret place. It was the gorge in the eastern corner of Tantaraboo. One side was a steep bank. The other side was like a cliff. Tall gum trees stood squeezed in between the huge rocks. Along the bottom of the gorge ran a creek. In one spot it had banked up against a rock and formed a big pond. Its water was crystal clear, deep and icy cold. Perfect for a dip on a hot summer's day.

"We call it the pool", Stelze said to Pirate. "Do you recognize it?"

Again, Pirate vigorously shook his head.

Hoover jumped right into the water with a big splash.

"What is he doing?" Pirate asked.

"He's swimming," Ajax answered.

"Like a pirate ship," Pirate shouted. "It's my ship. My schooner. I want to hop on."

Hoover swam back to the bank for Pirate to jump onto his back. Pirate was now in command. He was dreaded Captain Babybird, ruling over the gang of pirates on his ship. He told the Quartermaster to look out for the other ships they could attack. The Sailing Master pulled up the sails to catch the wind, despite the still air down here in the gorge. The Gunner quickly aimed the cannon at everything that moved.

Ajax jumped into the water.

"Avast! Avast!" Pirate shouted. "There is the sea monster. The giant octopus. It's going to eat us. Let's get away from here."

"Aye, aye captain," Hoover said, accidentally swallowing water. He snorted

and coughed while Pirate was urging him to go faster.

“It’s hungry like a bear. It wants us for breakfast.”

Ajax liked the idea of being a giant octopus. He gave everything to be a very scary one. He raised his front legs, pretending to swing around his giant tentacles. Their countless suction cups hovered over Pirate and Hoover, threatening to latch onto them and suck them dry. Ajax took a mouthful of water and spouted it in a big fat jet directly at Pirate.

“The octopus is spitting black ink at us,” Pirate yelled. “Faster, Hoover. Go faster.”

The force of the jet nearly swept Pirate off Hoover’s back. He clung to Hoover’s ear, burying his claws deep into the skin.

“Ouch!” Hoover yowled. “We have been hit. We’re going under.”

Pirate yelped and screeched. He was terrified of getting eaten by the giant octopus. Well, he knew that Ajax was only pretending. He actually was not keen to get wet. He was a bit scared of falling into the water. After all he was a bird that could not swim.

“I am not a giant octopus anymore,” Ajax eventually said. “I am now a pirate too. Captain Crook from Bloodcrust Island.”

“Friend or foe?” Pirate asked.

“Friend. Let’s have a pirate’s party.”

“Yo-ho-ho!” everyone cheered.

Whilst Pirate, Ajax and Hoover went back onto safe ground, Stelze and Buddha were watching them from under a tree. They had a serious talk.

“My idea of showing him all these places is not working”, Stelze said disappointed. “He cannot remember a thing.”

“He truly lost his memory, mate,” said Buddha.

“I guess we will never know where he comes from.”

“It might not be for good, mate. Sometimes memories do come back after a while.”

“How?”

“Well, it either just comes back by itself or Pirate gets another whack on his

head and then it comes back.”

“No, we can’t do that. We can’t hit him. We can’t do him harm.”

“It’s not what I’m saying, mate. Do you remember the thunderstorm yesterday? Maybe his loss of memory has something to do with that. It might have freaked him out.”

“I see,” said Stelze, pricking her ears. “With the next thunderstorm he would possibly recall what had happened to him.”

“Exactly, mate.”

“But it could be a long time until there is another thunderstorm.”

“We might get one soon. I can already feel it in my joints.”

Stelze let out a big sigh.

“You are quite fond of Pirate, aren’t you?” said Buddha.

“He loves us and he needs us,” said Stelze.

“I am not so sure about that myself, mate.”

“He adores you, Buddha. Since you gave him half of your dinner he only thinks the best of you. What about you? Do *you* like him?”

“It’s strange for a cat like me to say. But . . . yeah . . . sort of, mate.”

Stelze was right, Pirate did love them all. He loved Stelze because she had been like a mother to him. Or rather like a grandmother. Or both.

As Stelze said, Pirate did adore Buddha because he gave him beautiful fish for dinner last night. He was a bit of a weird chap though. Pirate did not always understand what he was on about when he spoke in complicated phrases.

Pirate loved Ajax and Hoover both the same. Both were silly in their way. However they had one thing in common and that was their love for fun. Life was a game. A funny game. And Pirate was eager to play with them.

“At a pirate’s party a pirate needs to drink,” said Pirate.

He and Ajax and Hoover pretended to sit around a barrel full of rum. It was a treasure they had plundered from a ship that happened to pass by just then. They constantly filled their glasses with the golden liquid and drank it bottoms up. Pretty soon they felt quite tipsy which made them laugh about every silly word they spoke. Luckily the barrel never got empty and so they continued to

guzzle down one glass after the other. Until they were totally drunk, or smashed like a real hard-partying pirate.

“Yo-ho-ho,” they sang. But it sounded more like creaking doors. Ajax and Hoover ended up howling, hugging each other, swaying back and forth and wagging their tails.

“Why do you wag your tails?” Pirate asked.

“Because we are happy and we want everybody to know.”

“I am happy too,” said Pirate. “I can wag my tail too.” He bent over, stretched his neck, lifted his bottom and wiggled his tail feathers.

“How about that one?” said Hoover, standing next to a pile of wombat dung. “Can you do that too?” He threw himself on his side rubbing his neck in the green sausage shaped droppings. After two or three good rubbings he plonked himself on his back and rolled in it like a snorting pig. “Yum!” he shouted. “It smells fantastic. Yo-ho-ho.”

“Dogs will always be dogs,” said Buddha to Stelze and shook his head. They both still sat under the tree and watched.

“Being a fussy cat you don’t understand”, Stelze responded. “Still, Pirate shouldn’t copy the dogs’ behavior. Rather, he should learn to fly. After all he is a bird.”

“Well, whatever he learns now, mate, will one day be for his own benefit.”

“A kookaburra smelling of wombat poo? Where is the benefit in that?”

Stelze wrinkled her nose.

“If I could roar like a lion I would be the most respected cat in Tantaraboo. Think about that, mate.”

“I suppose you’re right.”

“Hey, try this,” Ajax said, standing next to a fence pole. He lifted his left hind leg, and as male dogs do, squirted a quick and short stream of pee against the fence pole.

“Wow,” said Pirate. He was truly astonished. “That is amazing.”

He rushed to the fence pole and he too lifted his left leg. He closed his eyes and held his breath. But nothing happened.

“Push harder,” Hoover shouted from his flattened bed of wombat dung.

As Pirate was flexing all the muscles in his body and a groaning sound was coming out of his beak, he slowly tipped over to one side. And as stiff as a stuffed one-legged flamingo he crashed onto the ground.

“Ouch!”

Ajax roared with laughter. “Drunk as a skunk,” he said.

“Like a real pirate,” said Hoover. “Yo-ho-ho.”

Pirate sat on his bottom, covered in dust from top to toe, looking like a sugar powdered cake. He looked around, puzzled, but then raised one wing and shouted:

“Yo-ho-ho!”



Chapter 7

Pirate woke up with the fishy flavour from last night's dinner still in his mouth. What a feast it had been! Whole bits of fish as soft as butter, peppered with crumbly and crunchy bones swimming in honey coloured jelly. Yum! He hoped there would still be some left. He jumped off the couch and walked through the cat flap into the laundry where the food bowl was. He was disappointed to see that it was empty. But there were lumps of dry food scattered about the floor. Pirate picked one up and threw his head back to swallow it. The piece slid down his throat, but it was too big. He quickly spat it out before it clogged up his windpipe. He had a better idea.

He was going to soak it in water. In the tiny pond in the vegetable garden. Between the zucchini and the parsley. Once it had softened up it would go down his throat like a tender and slimy piece of fresh worm. He stared into the water, waiting for the lump of dry food to swell. All of a sudden he saw the reflection of a face on the water's surface, its pitch black eyes gazing at him.

“We haven't met yet, have we?” a very soft voice said.

Pirate looked up and found himself face to face with a snake.

“My name is Tiger,” the snake said. “I live in the paddock. Under a rock. And you are?”

Her voice was as soft as cotton balls rolling out of a silky bag. Her speech was as slick as boiled noodles slipping off a fork. The big black eyes glared at Pirate, luring him into a bottomless hole. Pirate wanted to say his name but could not open his beak. He was paralyzed, could not move a single muscle.

Not because of fear or shock. It was the snake's magic look that rendered him motionless, standing stiffly like a carrot stuck in the frozen grounds of the South Pole. Tiger's skin shone like silk with a regular pattern of grey stripes similar to a tiger's coat.

"It is not a problem," Tiger continued. "There is no need to say your name. I guess I already know it. It is Pirate, isn't it?" Her head remained in the same spot as her long and smooth body slid without a sound around Pirate. It encircled him; laid itself in a ring around him, then again in a second wider one and eventually in a third ring.

Pirate was trapped but he was not aware of it. Tiger's head came closer and her eyes grew bigger.

"Rumor has it you fell out of the sky," she said, her head starting to sway. "So you must be a very special bird."

The softness of her voice was numbing Pirate's mind. There was no thought left in his head. He joined in with the sway. With every gentle move a yearning to jump into the bottomless holes that gazed at him grew bigger and bigger. He just wanted to be in there, dwindling down for ever.

"Well, being a special bird you should not waste your time in this tiny backyard," Tiger continued. "Especially not in the company of these filthy dogs." For a split second she peered at the veranda where Stelze was still asleep on the couch. Having made sure that nobody was watching, Tiger circled her head in a smooth and fast motion all around Pirate's head. Pirate's eyes followed until he became dizzy. His head dropped, his mind went black. He could not see or hear anything, as if he was asleep.

"You are a good boy," Tiger said, slowly pulling her head back. "Now I will take you to a better place." With the power of an unleashed slingshot she darted towards Pirate. She opened her mouth, hissing and exposing the pointy teeth in the upper jaw, ready to pierce Pirate's throat. But she stopped short midway as all of a sudden the laughter of kookaburras filled the air. Tiger looked up, pulling her head in. "Bugger!" she whispered and carefully unwound herself.

At the same time, as if someone had poked him, Pirate woke up. Thoughts

poured back into his head. But he was not aware of the danger he was in. He watched the snake withdrawing and hiding behind the parsley.

“Yeah, let’s play hide-and-seeK,” he shouted, believing he had found a playmate.

Tiger hissed at him. “Shut your beak, will you?” She peered anxiously at the kookaburras now sitting in the gum tree in the far corner of the backyard. “They don’t need to know that I am here, so be quiet.”

“But—“

“Sssshush!” Tiger interrupted him. “Not so loud, for snake’s sake.”

“Are you scared of them?” Pirate whispered, joining Tiger behind the parsley. There he saw how worried she was. Her eyes were full of fear as she carefully watched the kookaburras in the tree. Slowly and steadily her long body slid backwards, as if trying to find a better spot to hide.

“Don’t go away. Stay with me,” Pirate begged. “I’ll ask them if they want to play with us.”

“Don’t you dare!” Tiger hissed.

“Well, then come back some other time.”

“I will when the time is right,” Tiger said and slid away, without a sound, making her way back into the high grass where she lived.

“Weird,” Pirate said. “What a weird animal she is. But funny.”

He looked up the tree where about a dozen young kookaburras were laughing their heads off. In an opposite branch sat another bird, a magpie. He was very annoyed with the kid kookaburras.

“What are you mongrels laughing about?” he shouted.

“About you,” one of the kookaburras said. “Your fly is open.”

The magpie looked down. He quickly crossed his legs and covered them with his wings.

“Oops”, he said.

Had his head not been covered in feathers you would have seen him blushing.

“Didn’t you know birds don’t wear pants?” one Kookaburra asked.

“That’s why you’ve got no fly,” another one said.

The kid kookaburras burst into tremendous laughter. It was loud and wild. Wilder than the funniest monkey party on Madagascar.

The magpie spread his wings and flew off as fast as he could.

“Hey, your shoe laces are undone too,” one kookaburra yelled after him.

They all rolled on their backs, held their bellies and laughed and laughed.

Pirate was beside himself. This was the funniest thing he had ever seen in his life. But there was not much laughter coming out of his beak. It was a rather skimpy little peep.

“Did you hear that?” one kookaburra asked.

“Yeah, what was that?” everybody else wondered.

“It was strange.”

“Not normal.”

“Creepy.”

“Like my grandmother's snore.”

“No! Look! It's that bird there. On the ground.”

The kookaburras swooped down on Pirate, fluttering and hopping all around him.

“What kind of bird are you?” they asked.

“A kookaburra,” Pirate said surprised, “like you.”

“You look different to us,” said the smallest kookaburra, pointing at the black patch on Pirate’s eye.

“I am a pirate,” Pirate said proudly.

“A parrot?”

“No, a pirate.”

“A real one?”

“I am the most dreaded pirate in the world”, said Pirate, puffing up his chest.

“All the creatures in the bush fear me. Watch out for me, or—“

He could not finish his sentence. The kookaburras’ roaring laughter drowned out his words.

“Real pirates have a wooden leg. Where is yours?” they teased him.

“Real pirates have a hook. Have you lost yours?”

“And real pirates have a pirate ship too. Where is yours?”

“Has it gone under?”

“I don’t think you’re a pirate.”

“No, you’re a parrot.”

“Going to a fancy dress ball.”

“With a girl!”

“Yuk!”

Their laughter pierced Pirate’s ears and somehow his heart too. It hurt. A strange feeling crept up his throat and made him want to cry. But he worked up all his courage and said with a shaky voice:

“You are funny. The joke you played on the magpie was really funny.”

“Funny?” the big kookaburra ridiculed him. He stopped fluttering and stood right in front of Pirate. “If it was so funny, why didn’t you laugh?”

“I did,” Pirate said.

“I did not hear it,” the big kookaburra said.

“Same here,” another one said.

“Did anyone?” the big kookaburra asked, looking at the others.

Everyone shook their head.

“Prove to us that you can laugh,” the big kookaburra demanded.

Pirate fell silent. Tears filled his eyes and he looked down, feeling ashamed.

“Tell him a joke,” one kookaburra suggested.

“Yes, tell him the chicken joke. That’ll make him laugh,” all the others agreed.

“It’s the best joke ever,” the big kookaburra said to Pirate as if he was voicing a threat. He brushed a wing across his beak and puffed up his chest.

“Here we go. Listen! Why was the chicken afraid of the chicken?”

“I’m . . . not . . . sure,” Pirate stuttered.

“Because he was chicken.”

A huge and unbearable silence filled the air. All eyes were now glued on Pirate. Everyone was waiting for him to burst into laughter. Pirate was

confused. He thought of the joke as a really funny one but he was scared to laugh. Yet he knew he had to. He raised his face, took a deep breath and opened his beak, ready to do the greatest laugh the valley of Tantaraboo had ever heard. But all that came out was a wimpy yowl:

“Yeeauu!”

Again, a huge and unbearable silence filled the air.

Until the big kookaburra said:

“He’s weird.”

“Strange,” another one added.

“Not normal.”

“He’s a freak.”

The big kookaburra gave Pirate a push. The smallest kookaburra had at the same time ducked behind Pirate’s legs. Pirate fell over him backwards and landed on his bottom.

“Let’s get out of here before he makes us sick with his germs,” the big kookaburra said.

On command the kookaburras jumped off, one after the other, and flapped away. The smallest one, being the tail of the flock, turned his head and yelled back:

“Stupid parrot!”



Chapter 8

Stelze woke up and found Pirate curled up hard against her chest, his head buried deep under his wings. Her instinct told her that something was bugging Pirate.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“I don’t want to play today,” Pirate mumbled from under his wings.

He feared bumping into the kid kookaburras a second time. They would only tease him again, laugh at him and push him over. He felt a strange tingling deep inside his chest. Did it make him sad? Or did it make him angry? Pirate could not tell. He did not know. Actually, he knew nothing whatsoever. That is what he thought. All he saw in his mind was the boulder the dogs called *The Whistler*. But it was not at the northern end of Tantaraboo. It stood right in front of him, in his path. And it was much bigger. Gigantic. There was no way to walk around it.

“Did you have a bad dream?” Stelze asked.

“I wish I had,” said Pirate.

“Well, that’s good. When bad things happen in your dreams you can’t change them. But you can when they happen in real life.”

Pirate lifted his head. “Is that so?”

“Yes it is, mate.” Buddha jumped onto the couch. “It is possible to change things in your life,” he continued. “If you can’t do it yourself, mate, you can always ask your friends to give you a hand. Or rather a paw. So, why don’t you tell us what happened this morning?”

Pirate told them everything about his encounter with the kid kookaburras. When he came to the part where the kookaburras pushed him over, a tear was

running down his cheek. He had to tell the story all over again as Ajax dropped in. He too wanted to know what happened. Pirate crawled out from under Stelze's chest and hopped onto her leg. This time, as he spoke of having been pushed over, there were no tears. He only had watery eyes. Once he had finished his story Ajax said:

“What a bunch of bullies.”

Finally Hoover joined the group. Pirate had to tell the same story again, a third time. He hopped onto the couch's armrest and told Hoover how the kookaburras teased him, laughed at him and pushed him over. But this time his eyes stayed dry. Once he had finished his story Hoover said:

“What a bunch of bullies.”

“Bullies are cowards,” Stelze added.

“And that's the truth, mate,” Buddha said. “A bully puts you down to make you feel lousy so he can feel great.”

Pirate was not sure if he understood what Buddha just said. This was again one of his complicated phrases.

Stelze put her paw on the armrest, next to Pirate. “What are we going to do about you?” she asked.

“I so wish I was able to laugh,” Pirate said with a big sigh.

Everybody fell silent. They all looked at each other and every now and then shrugged their shoulders. Finally Buddha stood up. He raised his tail and said:

“I guess it is time we teach you laughing, mate.”



Chapter 9

A rumour spreading through the valley of Tantaraboo said that dogs cannot laugh. It said dogs can only bark. However Stelze, Ajax and Hoover would suggest that dogs were able to laugh. After all they did it themselves, every now and then. And so did Buddha. This was proof enough that cats also can have a good chuckle. Buddha actually knew the art of laughing back to front. Teaching Pirate was his calling. He was very serious about it.

“Pirate’s first lesson shall be at dusk. At the fence next to the gum tree,” he said and ordered Ajax, Hoover and Stelze to set up the classroom.

Pirate could hardly wait. Going to school must be a lot of fun, he thought. He was very excited and followed the dogs all around the farm house, bombarding them with endless questions.

“When does school start? Is it time yet? What is the teacher like? Will I get a school bag? What are you doing?”

“We are collecting blankets for the classroom,” Stelze answered, with a lot of patience.

“Where is the school? Will the teacher be nice? Will I have a lunchbox? What are you doing?”

“I’ll have to drag my blanket back to the classroom,” Ajax answered, one corner of it lodged between his teeth. You could hear in his voice that he was a bit fed up with Pirate nagging him.

“Will I go to school every day? Will you come too? When is school? Is it time yet? What are you doing?”

“I am concentrating, mate,” Buddha answered, sitting on the fence post. “Do not disturb me.”

Under his watchful eye Ajax, Hoover and Stelze placed one blanket in the middle and the remaining four around it in a half circle.

“These are the chairs. And now we need desks.”

He ordered Ajax, Hoover and Stelze to roll up four big logs and one small log from behind the shed. That took them a while. The logs were heavy.

“Will I make many friends at school? When will I get my school bag? Can I have sweets in my lunch box? When is school? What are you doing?”

“Having a break, for dog’s snout’s sake,” Hoover answered, panting and throwing himself onto the ground under the fence. You could hear in his voice that he was begging Pirate to shut up.

Under Buddha’s instruction Ajax and Stelze set up one log on each blanket. Buddha walked around them a few times with stern eyes, asking for adjustments here and there. Eventually, at dusk, long after the sun had set, everybody was allowed to take a seat behind a log. Buddha of course sat in the middle.

“Welcome to my classroom, mates . . . err . . . students,” he said.

“Good evening Mister Teacher,” Pirate shouted. He was thrilled.

“This is the time of the day, when kookaburras sit in the tree tops and raise a wild chorus of rolling, raucous and crazy laughter,” Buddha explained. “Now, who of you students knows that distinct kookaburra laughter that sends a shiver down your spine if you happen to find yourself stuck in the bush at dusk and don’t know what on earth you are hearing?”

“I do,” Ajax quickly said, “woof woof.”

“Get out of here,” Hoover interrupted. “It goes like this: bow wow.”

“No, no, no!” Stelze said, “listen to this: roof roof.”

All three looked at Buddha, wagging their tails and waiting for his appraisal of who did the best kookaburra laugh.

Buddha though had pressed his paws against his ears and was rolling his eyes.

“I see,” he said, “you still have a lot to learn. Anyway, that’s what you’re here for. Well, first of all, in order to have a good belly laugh, the laughter needs to come from the bottom of the belly.”

Buddha was a strict teacher. Nobody was allowed to smack, to lick their bum or have their tongue hanging out. And nobody was allowed to stick their beak into their plumage. Everybody had to sit still. Pirate was very happy to obey his rules. He was proud to be a student and keen to be a good one. He paid great attention to Buddha’s demonstration of how to breathe in the air; how to push it down the belly; how to squeeze it out again and attach a sound to it. They all had to practice it over and over again, and every time it sounded like a bunch of crazy dogs going mad:

“Woof woof!”

“Bow wow!”

“Roof roof!”

Eventually Buddha asked Pirate to step forward.

“I can’t hear you, mate. The blooming dogs are too loud.”

He ordered them to keep quiet and asked Pirate to show him what he had learnt. Pirate spread his wings and took a deep breath. He took in a huge amount of air until his cheeks blew up and looked like fully blown balloons, ready to burst. With all his might he pressed the air down his stomach, waited for a heartbeat, squeezed the air back through his throat and shouted:

“Woof woof!”

Everybody fell silent. Ajax froze. Hoover pricked his ears. Buddha dropped his jaw.

“Holy fishbone! He’s barking!” he said. “I mean, he’s laughing!”

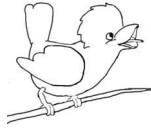
Stelze had a tear in her eyes.

“That’s my baby,” she said.

Pirate was stunned too. He expected to laugh like a kookaburra. But now he barked like a dog. He tried again, breathed in, pushed the air down, squeezed it back and out came again:

“Woof woof!”

“Wonderful,” Buddha said, proudly raising his tail. “Mission accomplished.”



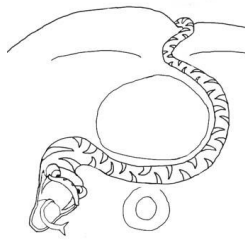
There was a lot of cheering and even dancing going on for the rest of the evening. Everybody had a ball. They told each other jokes and did funny things and laughed their heads off. Pirate was unstoppable. He was eager to refine his barking. Ajax taught him how to yelp. Hoover howled for all it was worth and Pirate copied him with ease. Only the growling proved to be difficult. He tried hard. But every time it was nothing more than a bubbling sound or a gurgle in his throat.

“Grrgl!”

“Not quite right,” Hoover said. “That wouldn’t even scare a fly.”

Stelze suggested he needed to practice more and encouraged Pirate to concentrate on the barking for now. She told another joke and made everybody laugh and bark again. Even late at night, once Pirate was curled up with Stelze on the couch, half asleep, he every now and then let out a soft *woof woof*. Stelze woke up every time but quickly drifted back to sleep with a happy smile on her face. Only Buddha got a bit funny with Pirate. At one stage he yelled down from the roof top:

“Hey, mate! Are you trying to shoo away the stars, or what?”



Chapter 10

The next morning, just before the sun rose, Pirate jumped out of bed. The dogs and Buddha were still asleep, exhausted from last night's party. Pirate went back to the classroom straight away. He sat down at his desk and practiced barking.

"Woof woof!"

It went quite well. It sounded as if it came out of a dog's throat. Admittedly a tiny dog. But it did not matter. Pirate was happy and relieved that he finally got rid of the wimpy screechy squeak the kid kookaburras had teased him about. Now he could laugh like a real dog. Would the kookaburras be pleased about it? he asked himself. What if they still made fun of him? Pirate started to worry that they might push him over again. Now he wished that he was a real dog. A huge, strong and frightening dog that growls at them and gets them terribly scared. Suddenly Pirate had an idea. Next time, when the kookaburras teased him, he would be growling at them. He started practicing:

"Grrgl! Grrgl! Grrrrgl!"

It was not a scary growl yet. It still sounded as if millions of tiny bubbles were whirling round his throat. Not even the tiniest fly would be scared by it.

"Well, well, well," a voice said all of a sudden.

Pirate turned around. Right in front of him was Tiger, the snake.

"Do you have a sore throat?" Tiger asked.

"No," Pirate answered.

"Why do you gurgle then?"

“I’m not gurgling. I’m growling.”

There was a big grin on Tiger’s face. She drew herself up until her head was high enough to stare into Pirate’s eyes.

“Ooh, I’m so scared. You are the most frightening kookaburra I have ever come across. Or should I say . . . dog?”

Without a sound her long body glided slowly around Pirate while her head seemed to stay in the same place. Her silky black eyes grew bigger and started to suck Pirate in like a vacuum cleaner.

“I can’t play with you now,” Pirate hesitated. “I am at school. In the classroom. In the middle of a lesson.”

Tiger’s head started to sway.

“Nonsense. This is not the right school for you. Come with me. Come to my pirate school.”

“A pirate school?”

Pirate could not help himself. His body followed Tiger’s movements.

“Is it a real pirate school for pirates?”

His head felt heavier and heavier. The sheer weight of it seemed to squeeze out all his thoughts.

“No,” he stammered, “I can’t come to the pirate school. Not now. I need to practice growling. But . . .”

He could hardly open his beak and he could no longer move. Captured by Tiger’s black and bottomless eyes his desire to fall into them grew bigger and bigger.

“Come with me,” Tiger repeated in the most soft and soothing voice.

But Pirate’s urge to practice his growling was bigger than any other feeling. And he was a bit annoyed too, if not angry, that Tiger tried to pull him away from the classroom. With all his might he opened his beak and started to growl at her, wanting to shoo her away. But all that came out was:

“Grrgl!”

But funnily enough it seemed to work. Tiger got a fright. Her jaw dropped. Her eyes wide open, now branded by sheer pain, she let out a silent scream. At

the same time a little kookaburra shouted:

“I’ve got her.”

Tiger’s tail was lodged in his beak. Before she was even able to yell at him he pulled her up straight into the air.

“Bring her up here,” the kid kookaburras shouted, sitting in the gum tree.

The little kookaburra feverishly flapped his wings, slowly gaining height like an overloaded helicopter. Tiger was wriggling and writhing like a worm pierced on a hook. Finally she regained her voice and shouted:

“Let go, you stupid little--”

“Get her up here,” the kid kookaburras in the tree cheered him on. “You can do it.”

“She is too heavy,” the little kookaburra said, and before the other kookaburras could rush to his aid, he let go of Tiger. She shot back to the ground and landed in front of Pirate.

“I’ll get you one day,” she said. “Everywhere you go, everything you do, I’ll be watching you. I’ll be following you. That’s my promise.”

Like a stray bullet she whizzed past Pirate, around the logs of the classroom and escaped into the high grass.

“Why didn’t you catch her?” scolded the kookaburras, furiously fluttering and hopping all around him.

Pirate was confused. He had no idea what the kookaburras were on about. But he understood that in their eyes he had done something wrong. That was most unfortunate. Of course now they really had good reason to be angry with him and punish him. Pirate felt guilty. He was ashamed. He dropped his head and shrugged his shoulders.

“That’s what kookaburras do,” the big kookaburra said. “We catch snakes. We grab their tails, pull them up and drop them onto a rock. But how would you know? You are only a stupid parrot!”

“I thought he was a pirate,” another kookaburra wondered.

“Shut up,” the big kookaburra said. “He is a parrot. A very stupid one.” He slowly walked around Pirate. His anger showed that he was thinking of some

form of punishment. “You owe us, you know. You owe us big.”

“I can laugh now,” Pirate said in his desperation.

“Can you?”

“I learned it. Yesterday.”

“Well, why don’t you show us?”

“Tell him a joke,” one kookaburra suggested.

“Yes, tell him the joke about the sick bird. That’ll make him laugh,” all the others agreed.

“It’s the best joke ever,” the big kookaburra said to Pirate. “Here we go. Listen! What do you give a sick bird?”

“I’m . . . not sure,” Pirate stammered.

“Tweetment!”

An unbearable silence filled the air. Pirate liked the joke. He thought it was a funny one and he would have laughed about it at any other time. But now he was scared. Still, he must laugh. He breathed in and instantly squeezed the air out again. It was not a laugh coming from the bottom of his stomach, as Buddha had taught him. It was a hollow laugh forced out of his frightened heart. So it sounded like nothing more than an ordinary bark.

“Woof woof.”

The Kookaburras looked at him in surprise.

“He is barking,” they said.

“He is barking like a dog.”

“What else can you do?”

“Can you lift your leg and pee?”

“Can you lick your bottom?”

“Can you growl?”

“Yes I can,” Pirate said without thinking. “Grrgl!”

The kookaburras burst into laughter.

“He’s a dog with a sore throat.”

“No, he’s not a dog and he’s not a bird. He can only be a dird or a bog.”

“Hang on, I know what he is. He’s a kooka-*barka*.”

“I’m not a kookabarka!” Pirate cried. “I am a kookaburra.” His eyes filled up with tears.

“Prove it to us,” the big kookaburra said. “Prove to us that you are a bird. Spread your wings and fly. We have not seen you flying yet. You are always walking on the ground. You don’t know how to fly, do you?”

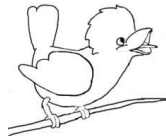
Through the thick tears Pirate glanced at the farm house. He wished Stelze would wake up and rescue him. But she was sound asleep on her couch. And there was no sign of either Ajax or Hoover. He closed his eyes, wishing the naughty kookaburras would simply disappear.

The kookaburras stuck their heads together. Pirate heard them whispering but could not understand a word they said. Every now and then one kookaburra turned its head towards him and chuckled. Finally the big one said:

“We will teach you flying.”

“Really?” Pirate opened his eyes.

“You will fly faster than a rocket to the moon. Hold onto my back. I’ll take you up the gum tree.”



Pirate’s knees were trembling as the kookaburras jostled him to the very tip of the highest branch.

“Well,” the big one said, the expression in his face becoming very serious. “It’s easy once you’re up in the air. All you do is keep your balance and you’ll be right. The most important thing though is the take off. Pay attention. You must do what I tell you.”

Pirate tried hard to hide his fear. He did not want the kookaburras to see how scared he was. After all he finally would learn how to fly. Once he spread his wings he would fly as fast as he could, escaping the kookaburras.

“Put the tip of your right wing in your beak,” said the big one.

Pirate did so.

“And now put your left foot in your beak.”

Pirate looked stupid as he now tried to keep his balance with a wing and a foot in his beak. He was just about to topple over when all of a sudden the big one gave him a push.

“Enjoy your flight”, he laughed.

All the kookaburras screamed and squealed and cheered as Pirate fell like a heavy rock towards the ground far underneath him.

“Help!” he screamed, helplessly flapping his wings, his legs desperately kicking the air. “Heelp!”

Alarmed by his cry Stelze came running, barking furiously at the kookaburras.

“Leave him alone. He is still a baby. He can’t defend himself. Shame on you!”

“Watch out or he’ll land on your snout,” the kookaburras talked back.

Stelze ran as fast as an old dog could run. But she would not make it in time to the bottom of the tree.

“Pirate,” she cried in despair, “do not fret. I’ll help you.”

“I’ve got him!” shouted Ajax suddenly from behind. Like a spring he jumped onto Stelze’s back and catapulted himself in a giant leap into the air, towards Pirate. Just as gravity began to force him back to the ground he grabbed Pirate as if catching a flying ball. Holding him firmly but carefully between his teeth he came back on his hind legs, then on his front legs, making sure Pirate had a soft landing and would not get hurt. The kookaburras in the tree had stopped their laughter and watched in amazement.

“Count yourself lucky that nothing happened to Pirate,” Stelze barked at them. “Now get out of my sight.”



Chapter 11

“Those kookaburras don’t like me,” Pirate said to Stelze. He pressed his body hard against Stelze’s chest as if he tried to hide between the short hairs of her coat. He did not see himself any longer as being the world’s most dreaded pirate. His fantasy pirate ship, or schooner as Buddha would correct him, had sunk to the bottom of the sea. It lay on its side in the murky sediment of the ocean floor, broken in half. Pirate felt lost. Without the ship he was not a real pirate anymore and without being able to fly he was not even a real bird.

Stelze drew her front legs closer together, gently squeezing Pirate. “They are just silly,” she said. “They think they are better and stronger than any other kookaburra. But they are not. They are no different to you. They are like you. They need to eat when they are hungry. They need to do a poo and a wee. And they have to go to bed when it’s dark. They do all the things you do. They are like you. No less and no more.”

“That’s not true. They can fly. I can’t,” Pirate said, tears in his eyes.

“Remember this, mate,” said Buddha, “a bully puts you down to make you feel lousy so he can feel great.”

Again, Pirate did not understand Buddha’s words or wisdom. He could still hear the kookaburras laughing at him. Again and again he saw himself falling out of the tree. That picture made him cringe.

Buddha, Hoover and Ajax watched Pirate burying his head further into Stelze’s chest. Hoover nudged Ajax and whispered:

“He is putting himself down.”

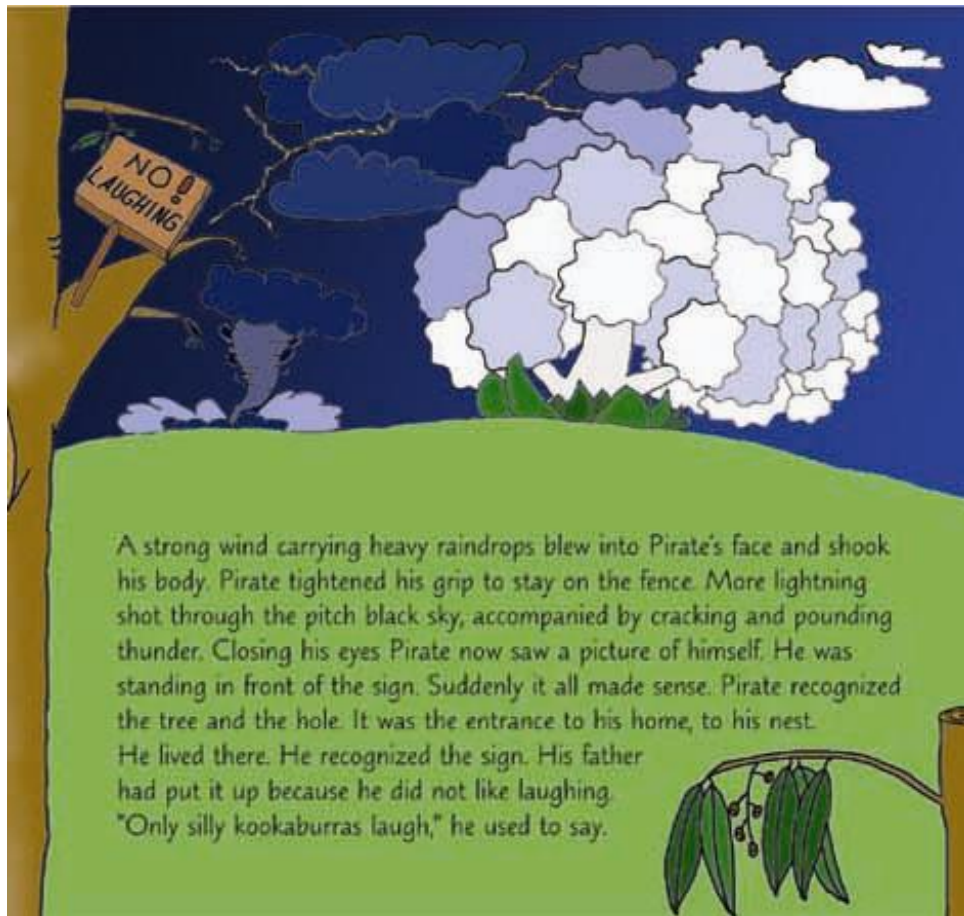
“That only makes him more miserable,” Ajax whispered back.

“I know,” said Hoover to his dismay.

Stelze lifted her head. She was at a loss too. She caught Buddha’s, Hoover’s and Ajax’s eyes, silently asking them for help. But they all shrugged their shoulders. Eventually Buddha stood up. He placed himself between the couch and the two dogs. Raising his tail he said in a solemnly serious voice, like a king to his citizens:

“I guess it is time to go back to school, mate. We will teach you flying.”

“Hear, hear,” everybody said in chorus.



A strong wind carrying heavy raindrops blew into Pirate's face and shook his body. Pirate tightened his grip to stay on the fence. More lightning shot through the pitch black sky, accompanied by cracking and pounding thunder. Closing his eyes Pirate now saw a picture of himself. He was standing in front of the sign. Suddenly it all made sense. Pirate recognized the tree and the hole. It was the entrance to his home, to his nest. He lived there. He recognized the sign. His father had put it up because he did not like laughing. "Only silly kookaburras laugh," he used to say.



Chapter 12

Pirate was on the brink of crying his eyes out as he sat for the umpteenth time on his log in the classroom, flapping his tired wings.

“What do I do now?” he asked.

“Jump! Jump now!” the dogs encouraged him.

Pirate jumped, or rather he let himself fall off the log, and again landed on his bottom.

“This is getting us nowhere. Follow me,” Stelze said to Pirate and bolted down the paddock, holding up her nose. The head wind picked up her ears and threw them around in big sloppy waves.

“Up and down!” she shouted. “Up and down!”

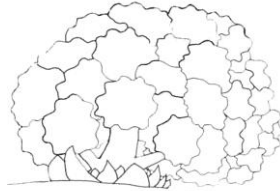
Pirate was running behind, trying to catch up, his wings stretched away from his body, stiff and straight. He could hear the sound of Stelze’s ears slapping against her head, like a wet mop hitting the floor. Stelze looked back at Pirate, still shouting.

“Up and down! Up and down!”

She did not see the bale of hay lying in her path. Buddha’s call to watch out came too late. She banged against it head on with such force that she flew head over heels. She finally landed on her back, looking at the world from upside down. She watched in awe as Pirate ran towards her, his beak wide open, letting out a long and frantic scream. A moment later he crashed into her.

“Uff!”

“Ouch!”



Pirate sat on the backyard fence, all by himself. His aching wings drooping.

“I will never ever fly,” he sighed.

Like his wings his head too was hanging down. He thought he had disappointed his friends because he had failed to fly.

“They don’t like me anymore.”

He turned around, his back now facing the farmhouse, the dogs and the cat.

“Who wants to be my friend anyway?”

A wall of black clouds slowly rose from behind the hills. Thunder, dull and heavy, rolled down the valley of Tantaraboo, spilling into every corner. It made Pirate flinch. For the first time he wondered where he came from. Somehow it did not make sense to him that Stelze was his mother or grandmother. She did not look like a bird. Actually she was not a bird. Most definitely not a kookaburra. She was a dog. Pirate asked himself why he lived with dogs and a cat. No other bird did that. They all lived together with other birds. He did not. He was different. Strange. Weird. No wonder the kid kookaburras teased and bullied him.

The clouds in the sky grew bigger. They had already swallowed the sun. Their tops were towering high up into the air and looked like a bunch of cauliflower burnt black in a hot oven. Lightning flared up, followed by monstrous thunder. Pirate cringed and as he closed his eyes he saw a picture of a huge gum tree. He knew the tree, had seen it before. It was not the gum tree in the backyard. It was another one. He opened his eyes and the picture was gone. More lightning and then more trembling thunder made him flinch. He closed his eyes and there again was the picture of the gum tree. There was a hole in the stem. It looked like an entrance to a cave. Next door to the hole was a sign. It said:

NO LAUGHING!

Pirate knew the sign. He had seen it so many times before. Suddenly it all made sense. Pirate recognized the tree and the hole. It was the entrance to his home, to his nest. He lived there. He recognized the sign. His father had put it up because he did not like laughing.

“Only silly kookaburras laugh,” he used to say.

That was the reason why Pirate could not laugh. His father never taught him.

Pirate remembered Buddha’s words after the dogs had found him in the vegetable patch. Buddha had said that Pirate had lost his memory. Back then Pirate did not understand what Buddha was talking about. But now he did. This picture in his head was his lost memory. He had found it again. With more monstrous thunder rolling down the valley Pirate could now see both his father and his mother.

“Mum! Daddy!” he shouted.

But neither answered his call. The picture started to move, and it was as if Pirate was now watching a movie. A movie with himself in it.

His father flew away, going to work. And his mother flew away too, going to a paddock looking for food. Pirate had to stay back. He sat down in front of the entrance. He was all alone and sad. All of a sudden the wind carried kookaburra laughter coming from the gum tree next door. There, the neighbours were playing a funny game. The parents were tickling their children, making them squeal and bawl.

“Can I play with you?” Pirate called out to them. “I want to laugh too.”

But the kookaburras did not hear him. Their tremendous laughter drowned his call. He hopped along the branch and called again:

“Can I please play with you? I want to laugh too.”

But no one heard him. He hopped further to the very end of the branch. In the meantime the wind had become stronger and whipped through the tree, shaking branches and plucking leaves. Pirate tightened his grip. Suddenly the sky opened up. Rain was pelting down like a waterfall. Lightning was shooting out of the black clouds, followed by deafening thunder. The wind grew into a

tornado. Its mighty force broke off the branch Pirate was sitting on and took him with it. The tornado whirled over the tree tops, over the hill and down the paddocks. Pirate was spun around with dizzying speed, the roaring and the thunder deafening his ears and the lightning blinding his eyes. But then, as if the tornado was tired of carrying him any further, it spat him out. Pirate shot towards the ground beneath him, straight into a vegetable garden, where he landed on his head.

“Ouch!”

He looked around. Soaked, his feathers pointing away from his shivering body like crooked needles, he found himself standing between the lettuce and the carrots. Stelze, Ajax, Hoover and Buddha were staring at him.

“Here you are,” said Stelze relieved. “We were worried that you got lost in the thunderstorm.”

“It’s like the day we found you,” said Hoover.

“It is,” said Ajax. “On that day there was a thunderstorm too.”

“You stood in the exact same spot,” said Hoover. “Between the lettuce and the carrot.”

“Hang on, mate. Hang on.” Buddha interfered. “Do not confuse him any longer. This could be the famous, long awaited bang on his head.” Buddha looked Pirate in the eyes. “Let me ask you, mate. Where do you come from?”

Pirate pointed at the fence. “From there . . . I guess.”

“Let me ask you again, mate. Where do you *really* come from?”

Pirate shook his body. He now remembered.

“From home. I come from home. I know where I live.”

“He’s found his memory,” Ajax shouted.

“He’s got it back,” said Hoover.

Everybody was jumping up and down with joy. Only Stelze sat silently on the side. She realized that the day she had dreaded more and more had finally come. The day when Pirate remembered where he belonged, and wanted to go home.



Late at night, when Pirate was finally asleep, everyone sat together with stern faces. Pirate had described the exact way the tornado had carried him. It was easy to figure out where his home was.

“It’s up in the north,” said Buddha. “A gorge, a paddock and a hill away from here.”

“It’s a long way,” said Ajax.

“We will have to walk him home,” Hoover sighed.

“I’ll go with him,” said Stelze.

“Don’t forget, you’re an old dog, mate,” Buddha interfered. “Shouldn’t we all come?”

“No,” Stelze insisted. “He’s my baby. It’s my duty to get him home.”

“But we are his friends.”

“I’ll do it tomorrow morning. By myself. You stay back. It’s just Pirate and me.”



Chapter 13

Pirate sat comfortably on Stelze's neck, his claws firmly wrapped around her collar. Stelze carefully waded through the high bracken down the steep slope to the bottom of the gorge. At the big pond, she stopped for a drink. The whole time Pirate was staring back at the top of the gorge.

"What are you looking at?" asked Stelze.

"Nothing," said Pirate quickly. But he was lying. Actually, he was keeping a secret he shared with Buddha, Ajax and Hoover. Back at the farmhouse they had promised him, behind Stelze's back, to follow in secret. Somewhere on the way they would come out of hiding.

"We'll walk the rest of the way with you, mate," Buddha had said. "Whether Stelze likes it or not."

"After all we are family," Ajax had said.

"We have to stick together," Hoover had added.

Once Stelze had satisfied her thirst she slowly made her way up the cliff on the opposite side of the gorge. At the top and out of the cooling shade she stopped again, looking in awe at what lay in front of her.

"This is the paddock," Pirate shouted. "I remember it. The tornado carried me all the way across from that big boulder over there."

He pointed at it.

Since dogs do not have the best eyesight Stelze could only recognize a black dot in the far distance. She took a deep breath and continued on.

The grass was high and prickly, its tallest tips towering over Stelze's neck. Pirate spread his wings and felt the stroking of the grass tips under his feathers.

They tickled. He imagined it was the wind stroking his wings while he was flying. Every now and then Stelze stopped and looked back, pricking her ears.

“What are you looking at?” Pirate asked.

“Just checking if everything is alright.”

Stelze continued walking very slowly. As if trying not to break the long grass she carefully put one paw in front of the other. After a few steps she stopped and looked back, again pricking her ears. This time she was sniffing the air too. Pirate became suspicious.

“What are you sniffing at? Is someone following us?”

“Nonsense, nobody is following us.”

But Pirate became excited all of a sudden. He let go of Stelze’s collar and hopped to the very end of her back.

“It’s him. It’s Ajax. I know it. He’s followed us. He wants to come with us.”

“Better not. I told him to stay back and guard the farmhouse.”

“Then it’s Hoover.”

“He would never walk that far.”

“Then it’s Buddha.”

“He hates long walks.”

“But they promised.”

“What did they promise?”

“Nothing,” said Pirate quickly, before he almost blurred out his secret.

“Anyway, then it can only be . . . Tiger.”

Stelze stopped short. “How do you know Tiger?”

“I met her in the backyard. She said she follows me wherever I go. She wants to play with me.”

Stelze ordered Pirate to hop off and sit down in front of her. She started to tell him off, like furious mothers do with their naughty children.

“Never ever play with Tiger. She is a vicious snake. She is dangerous. She only pretends to play with you. She actually chases you. She hypnotizes you. She takes away your will until you can’t move anymore. Not even your little claws. And then she bites you. She poisons you with her long teeth. Soon after

you will die.”

“How soon after?” Pirate asked, his eyes wide open.

“Three hours.”

“That’s very soon.”

After he had promised to never play with a snake, especially Tiger, Pirate climbed back onto Stelze’s neck. She continued to walk, under the hot sun, through the vast paddock, the boulder still far away. Her tongue was hanging out, nearly touching the ground. She was panting so loudly and heavily that Pirate could not hear the flies buzzing around his head anymore. When she again stopped walking and looked back to sniff the air, Pirate started to worry.

“I’m scared. Is Tiger following us?”

“Nobody is following us. I’m only making sure that no other snake is nearby. Snakes like to be in the high grass. It protects them from their enemies because they can’t be seen. That’s why I walk slowly. That way I won’t step on one by accident.”

After many more stops they finally reached the boulder. Stelze was exhausted.

“The heat is killing me. We need a rest.”

On the other side of the boulder Stelze lay down in a shady spot, squeezing her exhausted body against the cool rock. She told Pirate to stay on her neck. But she had hardly finished her sentence before she fell asleep in an instant. Pirate closed his eyes and tried to sleep too but he was not tired enough. He decided to stretch his legs and explore the boulder. He hopped to the other side and saw a mouse rushing into the high grass.

“Wait for me,” he said. “Don’t run away. Let’s play.”

He rushed into the high grass too but quickly lost sight of the mouse.

“Where are you?”

There was a rustle coming from behind a thick bundle. Pirate was convinced that the mouse was hiding.

“Let’s play hide-and-seek. I have to find you.”

Slowly and carefully, like Stelze did in the paddock, he put one foot in front

of the other. After a couple of steps he was close enough and jumped behind the bundle.

“I’ve got you!” he cheered but stopped short as he found himself standing right in front of Tiger. His heart fell all the way down to his knees.

“I’ve got *you*,” said Tiger in her soft and silky voice. “Hide-and-seek is my favourite game. I am very good at it.”

“Stelze said, you only pretend to play,” Pirate stuttered, staring into her black and bottomless eyes. He was scared. “Stelze said you are vicious.”

“And dangerous. I know.” She slid around Pirate. Twice. Fast and without a sound. Now he was trapped. “This time you won’t escape from me. I suppose you know what is going to happen to the naughty little kookaburra that you are.”

“Stelze said you have poisonous teeth.”

“Well, well, well. You paid attention to her lecture. You are a good student. What else did Stelze say?”

“That your poison will kill within three hours.”

“How right she is! But she didn’t tell you that you will die a slow and painful death.”

“Please don’t bite me,” Pirate begged.

“Don’t worry. I won’t let you suffer. I’ll be fast. I am going to swallow you in one piece.”

She hissed and ripped her mouth wide open. Pirate stared in awe at the two long and pointy teeth. He was frightened and screamed, or rather barked, as loud as he could.

“Woof! Woof!”

Tiger stopped short.

“What the holy snake was that?”

She was puzzled, ogling at Pirate as if she could not figure out who or what he was. Pirate jumped at the chance and started running. He staggered through the thick grass and barked and peeped and screamed at the same time.

“Help! Woof! Stelze! Peep! Woof! Help!”

Tiger chased after him. She snapped at him, again and again, wanting to bite him.

“Stop! Freeze! You won’t escape from me.”

Pirate ran for his life, out of the high grass, around the boulder to the shady spot where Stelze lay.

“Stelze! Help! It’s Tiger!”

Stelze was already up on her legs.

“Hide behind me,” she told Pirate and jumped forward into Tiger’s path. But before she could bark at her, Tiger sunk her teeth into her paw. Stelze fell onto her back, yelping and throwing her legs around. Tiger held on for a while, wiggling and swirling her long body as if she was a worm pierced on a fishing hook. Eventually she let go and was catapulted through the air. She plunged into the paddock where she disappeared in the high grass.

“She bit you!” Pirate screamed. “Tiger bit you.”

Stelze lay flat on her side, gasping for air. The deep wrinkles on her forehead showed that she was in tremendous pain. Pirate was beside himself.

“Don’t die. Please, Stelze, don’t die.”

“You must be brave now, Pirate,” she wheezed. “I must keep still. I have to stay here. Go back to the farmhouse. Go and get help.”

“No, Stelze. I’m not leaving you alone. Please, don’t die.”

“Go! Now! Run!”

Pirate was running through the paddock, along the track they had left in the grass on their way to the boulder. His eyes were filled with tears. Everything in front of him was blurred. A long journey lay ahead of him. He needed to run faster. Stelze will die within three hours. How long will it take him to get to the farmhouse? Will he make it in time? Faster, he told himself, faster. Every minute counted.

“Please, please, let me fly,” he prayed, pushing his body off the ground while he was running. And as he spread his wings, he lifted off, as if an invisible hand had picked him up. He was now gliding in a smooth line, feeling the tips of the grass stems stroking his wings. But all of a sudden he started to drift. He lost

his balance as he tried to flap his wings, and he was starting to tilt. Slowly at first, from left to right and back again. But suddenly he toppled and eventually spiraled out of control. Like a deflated balloon gone wild, he plunged into the grass. To his surprise he landed right between Buddha, Ajax and Hoover.

“You’re here! I knew you would come,” he cried.

“Well, we stick to our promise, mate,” said Buddha. “We told you that we would follow.”

“Stelze!” Pirate interrupted. “We must help her. She is going to die. She was bitten by Tiger.”

“Where is she?” Buddha asked.

“Back there. At the boulder.”

You could see the shock in Ajax’s and Hoover’s face. Buddha kept his cool, though, and told everybody what to do.

“We must take her to the hospital. Ajax, you are the fastest runner. Go back to the farmhouse and get the master with his ute. In the meantime Hoover and I will go to Stelze. She needs us to comfort her. Pirate, you find the kid kookaburras. We need their help.”

Pirate got a fright. “But I have--“

“The kookaburras must find Tiger. The veterinarian at the hospital needs to know what kind of snake she is. This is very important. This is crucial. Only then can he give Stelze the right treatment, the right anti-venom.”

“But the kookaburras will--“

“They must deliver Tiger to the hospital. The faster the better. The kookaburras know where it is. Everybody, do it now!”

Ajax had already run off. Buddha and Hoover rushed towards the boulder. Only Pirate stood back. He was confused. He was frightened to look for the kookaburras. How could he ask them for help? What if they bullied him again?

Buddha looked back and yelled at Pirate:

“You can do it. I know you can do it. Go! Now! Run!”



Chapter 14

Every minute and every action counted in order to save Stelze's life. Buddha and Hoover were finally with her. Her pain had eased but she was now complaining about being very weak and short of breath. Hoover managed to pull her back into the shady spot. Buddha had chewed off a bunch of grass. With his mouth he firmly wrapped the long stems around Stelze's ankle, above the spot where she was bitten.

"It will slow down the blood flow," he said calmly. "We have to make sure the poison is not running into your heart."

Ajax was back at the farmhouse. He scratched at the door and barked until Stelze's master stepped out, wondering what was going on. Ajax kept making a fuss. He ran to the ute and back to the door and back to the ute, yelping and barking.

"Bloody offal," he actually was saying. "Don't you get it? Hop into your bloody ute and follow me. Hurry up!"

Stelze's master eventually understood. He followed Ajax who ran ahead as fast as a whirlwind to the boulder in the paddock.

Pirate was less fortunate. He still had doubts about looking for the kookaburras. He was afraid of their nastiness. At the same time he was devastated about Stelze's snake bite. He feared she would die. The tears in his eyes were the result of all of his worries. Because of them he could not see a thing. No wonder he did not realize that he was approaching the end of the paddock. As he felt the rocky ground under his claws it was too late. He shot over the top of the cliff. The fluttering and the screaming did not help. He fell down the gorge and with a big splash, like an explosion, he hit the icy cold water of the pool. His body froze. He could not move and went under. He sank down to the bottom of the pool into a silent darkness. Strange pictures popped

up in his head. He saw Stelze sleeping next to the boulder. But it was not the one he had left her at. It was *The Whistler*. It still had the stick in its pointy mouth. It was flicking, like the tongue of a snake. The mouth grew bigger, so too did the stick, while the whole head was swaying. Suddenly the boulder opened its mouth, revealing two giant pointy teeth. With a big roar it went down on Stelze.

“No!” Pirate shouted. “Stelze must not die.”

Trillions of air bubbles flowed out of his beak. As he tried to breathe in he swallowed a bucket load of water. It threatened to suffocate and kill him. But Pirate refused to die. He needed to live. He had to help Stelze. Stelze would not survive if he did not find the kookaburras. He had to convince them to help him. Whether they bullied him or not. It did not matter. It was Stelze who mattered now.

With all his might he wriggled and jiggled his whole body: the claws; the legs; the wings; the head and pushed himself back to the surface. Coughing and spluttering he crawled onto the bank where he collapsed.

“It’s that stupid parrot again,” someone said.

Pirate looked up. The kid kookaburras were gathering around him. They had flown by when they heard the splash and wondered what had happened.

“He smells like a wet dog,” the big kookaburra said.

“I think he wants to become a fish now,” the little kookaburra said.

“Yeah, a stinky dead fish,” another one said.

“Let’s throw him back into the water.”

Pirate cringed. Not because he was frightened by the naughty kookaburras. He cringed because he felt a tickling in his chest. A very angry tickling. It grew bigger and turned into a hammering. Weighty iron plates were banging against each other. Stronger, faster and louder until Pirate feared his heart was going to explode. He jumped onto his feet and spread his wings wider than ever. He had had enough of the kookaburras’ silly talk. His anger was throbbing in every fibre of his body. He now stood tall and strong, ready to fight the enemy with all his might. Soaked, the wet feathers pointing away from his trembling body

like sharp knives he screamed at the kookaburras:

“I am not a parrot and I am not a fish! I am Pirate. I am a kookaburra!”

Then he growled:

“Grrrr!”

Then he barked:

“Woof! Woof! Woof!”

And growled again:

“Grrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr!”

The kookaburras took a step backwards, Pirate a step forward.

“Stelze got bitten by Tiger. We must help her. We must find Tiger and deliver her to the hospital. The veterinarian needs her for the anti-venom. Otherwise Stelze will die. You must help me! Now! Grrrrrrrr!”

The kookaburras looked at Pirate in astonishment. The little one hid behind the big one. Eventually he said:

“I saw Tiger just before. Up there. At the top of the gorge.”

“Let’s go and get her. Now!” Pirate yelled.

Without hesitation and without a word the kookaburras took off, flying towards the top of the cliff.

“Hey! Wait for me,” Pirate said, flapping his soaked, heavy wings. But the kookaburras did not hear him and Pirate had to climb all the way back through the narrow and steep path to the top of the cliff. Up there he could hear the kookaburras yelling.

“There she is!”

“Get her!”

“The three of you to the right!”

“The others to the left!”

“I’ll take her from behind!”

“I’ll take her from the front!”

“We’ll take her in the middle!”

“Everybody, get her now!”

The kookaburras had formed a row and lunged at Tiger, all at once. Their

claws tightened around her skinny body they sat on Tiger like birds do on a perch. Their weight pushed her down into the ground. She was trapped. She had no hope of escape, was not able to move an inch. The little kookaburra gave her a whack on her head.

“Ouch!” cried Tiger. “Will you stop at once? You’re hurting me, you little pest.”

“To the hospital!” Pirate commanded, jumping onto the snake between two kookaburras. With Tiger in their claws they all lifted off.

The wind was blowing into Pirate’s face and had already dried off his feathers. Looking down, he felt dizzy. But the wonder of what he saw was far greater than any fear or worry. His eyes could see and grasp everything at once. The world underneath him had shrunk into one big playground, scattered with trees, houses, boulders and sheep as little as tiny toys. Pirate felt like a giant. Like a fearless giant bird circling the sky. Up here he was strong and safe. His claws firmly wrapped around Tiger’s body he now watched how the kookaburras flapped their wings. He copied their moves, was sometimes a bit slow, sometimes too fast. But soon he caught up with the rhythm. He pushed up his wings and held them still for a split second before he forcefully pulled them down again.

“You *can* fly,” said the big kookaburra. “Like a real kookaburra.”

Yes, Pirate could fly. At last.

“Thank you,” he said.

“What for?” the big kookaburra asked.

“For helping me.”

“It’s alright. That’s what friends are for. *I* am sorry.”

“What for?”

“For teasing you.”

“It’s alright. After all we are friends.”



On the other side of a hill, where the village with the hospital was, the kookaburras and Pirate set their wings at an angle. They quickly lost height and now drifted down in a smooth circle towards the hospital.

“There they are,” Pirate shouted.

He could see Ajax, Hoover and Buddha looking through an open window. After a swift dive the kookaburras flew over their heads straight through the window into the veterinarian’s surgery. There they dropped Tiger on a table.

Buddha, Ajax and Hoover were all making a fuss at the same time. They barked, yelped and miaowed until the veterinarian and Stelze’s master came running.

“Bloody offal and bloody fishbone,” they were actually saying. “Don’t you get it? She’s the snake who bit Stelze. Hurry up!”

The veterinarian and Stelze’s master eventually understood. What happened after no one could witness. Stelze was in a different room, behind closed doors. And the veterinarian had shut the window.

“There is nothing we can do anymore,” said Buddha. “Let’s go home.”



Chapter 15

Back at the farmhouse time seemed to have come to a standstill. Pirate was sitting in the driveway on top of the gate, waiting. Waiting for news from the hospital. Waiting for Stelze's master to bring her home in the ute. Ajax, Hoover and Buddha sat on the veranda. They were speaking softly but Pirate could hear every word they were saying.

"What is going to happen to Tiger?" Ajax wondered.

"Once the veterinarian had a look at her she will end up in the zoo," said Buddha.

"That's good," said Hoover. "There she won't be able to bite anyone anymore."

"When will Stelze be back?" Ajax asked.

"Hopefully soon, if everything goes well," Buddha answered. "But it doesn't look good for her. We got her to the hospital quite late. Almost too late. I hope there was time enough to give her the anti-venom."

"Let's hope for the best," said Hoover.

"Yes, let's hope for the best," Ajax added.

"She'll be right, mate," Buddha said, holding back a tear.

Pirate had his eyes set on the driveway, wishing the ute would come around the corner now. But it took another endless hour, even a whole eternity until it finally pulled up. Pirate ran up to the veranda, hoping to see Stelze jumping out of the car. But she did not. Instead her master leaned over the passenger seat. As he turned around he was holding Stelze in his arms. Pirate's heart sank to the bottom of his stomach. Stelze lay in her master's arms like a scrubby, worn

out scarecrow he once saw in a paddock. Her eyes were shut. Her head was hanging down, her ears swaying like two wet rags. Her legs were dangling in all directions while her master carried her to the veranda and gently put her down on the couch. Ajax and Hoover wagged their tails, but instantly pulled them in after they had a sniff at her. That was not a good sign. Pirate held his breath. He jumped onto the couch and nudged Stelze's snout with his head.

"Wake up, Stelze. Wake up," he whined.

But Stelze did not move. Pirate dropped, leaning against her head. He could still feel the warmth of her body. Pressing his body against hers he burst into tears.

"I don't want you to be dead. Please, wake up. Wake up."

He looked at her mouth and remembered the first time he had snuggled up to her. Back then he was taken by the soft skin of her lips. He had pulled them with his beak, had stretched them nearly over his head. All of a sudden they flipped back with a hollow smack and Pirate himself fell backwards, landing on his bottom.

"Ouch!"

How funny that was!

"I don't want you to be dead," he whined again, pulling her lips softly and closing his eyes. "Please, don't be dead."

While his tears were rolling down his beak and dropping over Stelze's lips he wished back the times when he slept between her legs, feeling very safe. He remembered and could feel again Stelze's gentle strokes when she licked his feathers clean. He felt Stelze's tongue making its way up to his head. It buried him under its warm and spongy flesh. Pirate could feel and even smell the soaking trail of dog's spit all over his face. Back then he thought it was disgusting. But now he wished the licking had never ended. He would have given everything to make Stelze alive again. While he pressed his body harder against hers he believed he heard a sudden giggle. And then another, longer one. And a chuckle. The giggling and the chuckling both grew louder until Pirate opened one eye. He saw Buddha, Ajax and Hoover standing in front of

the couch. They giggled and chuckled and at the same time pointed at something above Pirate's head. Wondering what it was, he opened the other eye and looked up. And then he saw it, Stelze's tongue, as wet as a dripping facecloth. It landed on his face with a smack like a whale's splash into the ocean.

Buddha, Ajax and Hoover burst into laughter.

"Are we having a morning bath, mate?" said Buddha.

"Babies are all the same, they don't like to be washed," said Stelze softly and gave Pirate another big slurp with her tongue.

Pirate looked at her in disbelief. Finally he shouted:

"Stelze! You are alive! You are alive!"

All hell broke loose. A cheery, jolly and happy hell though, if anything like it ever existed. Anyway, it did now. Pirate exploded with joy. He jumped up and down and all over Stelze, picking and nudging her head and ears at the same time and constantly shouting:

"You are alive! You are alive! Stelze, I can fly." He flew as fast as a rocket to the fence. There he turned around in a whoosh and came back even faster. Hovering over her head he yelled:

"Look! I can fly. I can fly."

"That's my baby," said Stelze with an enormous smile on her face, reaching from one ear to the other.

After near endless celebration everybody ended up snuggling up to each other on the couch. Stelze in the middle, Pirate between her legs.

"Does it still hurt?" Pirate asked, looking at the bandage around Stelze's paw.

"No, it doesn't," Stelze answered. "I still feel a bit weak though. Give me another week and I'll be back on my paws."

"The wicked never die young, as my mother used to say," said Buddha.

"Pirate, you did a fantastic job," said Hoover. "I couldn't believe my eyes when I saw you flying with Tiger in your claws."

"You were very brave," Buddha agreed. "But I knew that you can do it."

“Without your help we wouldn’t be sitting here right now,” said Ajax.

Pirate told Stelze about his adventure with the kookaburras. He was very proud about not being scared of them anymore. They were his friends now.

“How did you do that?” Stelze asked.

“I barked and growled at them. Woof woof! Grrr!”

“Like a true dog,” said Buddha, giving Stelze a smirk. “Didn’t I tell you back in the gorge that whatever he learns now, will one day be for his own benefit?”

“Yes, you were right,” Stelze admitted. “I suppose, once I’m back on my paws, I should learn how to fly.”

“And I will teach you,” Pirate laughed.



Chapter 16

The next morning, long before the first sun beams hit the couch on the veranda, Pirate woke up. He thought someone had called his name. He tried to listen but there was silence. Only the leaves in the gum tree were rustling in the gentle breeze. Feeling the warmth and the softness of Stelze's legs around his body Pirate snuggled up to them and closed his eyes. He let out a sigh from deep down his belly, as he heard his name again.

“Pirate.”

It was not so much a calling. It was rather a whisper. Pirate looked around. Stelze was still asleep. So were Ajax and Hoover. Their heads were resting between their paws, their eyes closed. Buddha was curled up in the corner. He too was asleep.

“Pirate.”

There was that voice again. Pirate heard it loud and clearly. He was not dreaming. It came from under the couch.

“Come with us,” the voice said.

A tremor went through Pirates body. He thought he recognized Tiger’s voice. How did she get under the couch? How could she have escaped from the zoo?

“Quick. Jump. Don’t wake up the dogs,” the voice said.

Pirate crawled to the edge. Using all his courage he lowered his head, ready to bark and growl at Tiger and shoo her away forever. But to his surprise it was not the snake he was facing. Under the couch, huddled in a corner and looking anxiously up to him, were his parents.

“Mum! Daddy!” Pirate shouted.

Of course everybody woke up at once. Ajax and Hoover, assuming there was an intruder, jumped off the couch. They ran back and forth through the backyard, barking in all directions. Stelze lifted her head and let out a deep and frightening growl. Buddha got a fright and stood frozen in the corner with an arched back and his tail raised. The birds in the bush were singing and shrieking as if they were squabbling about who woke up whom. The magpies were screeching in disgust and even the kid kookaburras came flying. But they thought it was fun and their laughter eventually turned the sudden clatter into a deafening racket. Amid the noise Pirate was still shouting:

“Mum! Daddy! It’s you!”

It took a while before everyone had calmed down. It took even longer before Pirate’s parents had the heart to come out from under the couch. After Pirate had assured them that the dogs and the cat wouldn’t do them any harm they finally fell into each other’s wings.

“We missed you so much,” Pirate’s mum said and covered him with kisses.

“How did you find me?” Pirate asked.

”The kid kookaburras told us,” his parents answered, pointing at the gum tree where the kookaburras were sitting and watching.

“They are my new friends,” Pirate said with pride. “And my very best friends are Stelze, Buddha, Ajax and Hoover.”

Pirate’s parents thanked them for looking after Pirate. Wings and paws were shaken.

“No worries mate,” said Buddha. “Pirate can come back anytime when he feels like a good fishy meal.”

“Yo-ho-ho,” said Ajax and Hoover. “He can come back anytime when he feels like a mighty pirate’s party.”

“Please,” said Stelze. “He can come back anytime when he needs us. We will always be here for him.”

“I will visit you every day,” said Pirate. “Since I can fly I’ll come every day and play with you all day.”

“No!” said Pirate’s father with a very serious voice. “That won’t be necessary.”

Pirate was stunned at his words and very close to tears. His father laid his wings over his shoulder.

“Listen, son,” he said. “I know we’ve made a lot of mistakes in the past. We left you on your own far too often. But from now on we will be a happy family. Your mother and I have decided to work less. That means we will have more time for you. We will have lots of fun and we will laugh as much as we can. We kookaburras need to laugh. Actually, we must laugh. For that reason we will move away from home. Away from the sign that I had put up. We will move into a new home far away from the old place.”

“How far away are we going to move?” Pirate asked.

“Well,” his father said. “We are not sure yet. Things need to be well considered, you know. But looking around in this backyard I have to say that the gum tree in the corner over there looks pretty good to me. We might move into there. What do you think?”

“That means-,” said Pirate but he was too excited to finish the sentence.

“It means, as I said in the beginning, it won’t be necessary to visit your friends. You’ll be seeing them every day all day because you’ll be living right next to them. How about that?”

“Woof woof!” Pirate laughed.

He was now beside himself with joy. He did not notice how astonished his parents were as they watched him jumping up and down. They obviously did not understand why their son, a kookaburra, was barking like a dog. And they were not sure either if they should be worried about it or think that it was a great achievement. Nonetheless they were happy to have Pirate back and decided to think about his barking some other time.

“Come and play with us,” the kid kookaburras called down from the gum tree.

Pirate did not hesitate. He spread his wings, lifted off and flew faster than a rocket to the moon straight into the tree. In there the little kookaburra asked

Pirate:

“Can you teach me barking and growling?”

“Later,” Pirate answered. “Now, let’s play pirates.”

Buddha asked Pirate’s parents to sit with them on the couch.

“Let’s have a chat, mate, as good neighbours do,” he said.

Stelze was happy too. Today she already felt a hundred times better than yesterday. The anti-venom was working well. She could already sit up and in a couple of weeks she would be able to walk again. But to know that Pirate would from now on be by her side made her believe that she would become healthy even faster. Perfectly content and with a big smile on her face she watched Pirate and the kid kookaburras playing in the gum tree. They were chasing each other from branch to branch, plundering every ship and scaring every other pirate crossing their path. Ajax and Hoover were chasing each other on the ground around the tree. Hoover wore his food bowl on his head, pretending to be a bloodthirsty pirate. Ajax was brandishing a stick, pretending to be Captain Crook.

“Avast!” Pirate yelled down the tree. “I spot a pirate ship. It’s coming over from Bloodcrust Island. Pirates, get ready for attack. We can do it!”

A magpie came by and sat down on a branch in the tree next door. For a long time it watched with great interest what was going on. But soon it started to shake its head in disbelief. Until Pirate shouted at him:

“Hey, mate, your fly is open.”

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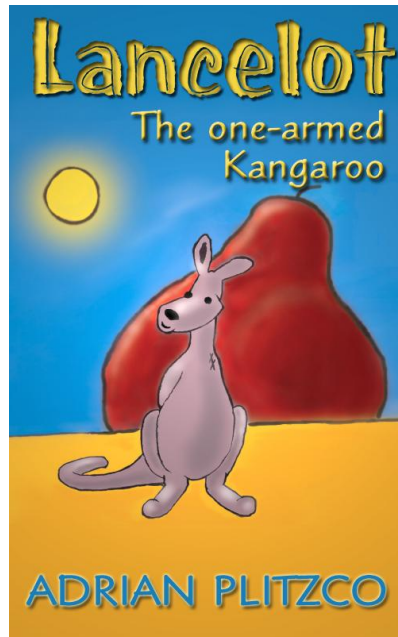


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