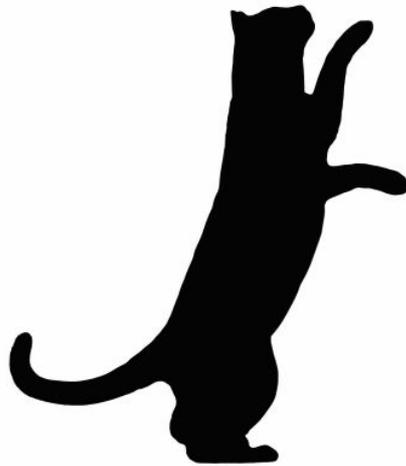


# Mister Pushkin Sniffs Out Trouble



For several minutes, Mister Pushkin had watched two dungaree'd men with hosepipes squirting an elephant with water. He knew that Emma watered her sunflowers so they would grow, and wondered whether the men expected the same thing to happen to the elephant? Surely, it was big enough already? The elephant was enjoying itself, rolling around with its tree-trunk legs in the air, flapping its enormous ears and trumpeting a terrific tune through its trunk. So much water was being squirted that the parched earth was becoming a lovely mud bath. Mister Pushkin deduced that it's mission seemed to be to coat itself with mud quicker than the men could wash it off.

A pair of giraffes sauntered through the trees, craning their long spotted necks to the top of the canopy, and selecting only the freshest leaves. As they chewed, Mister Pushkin observed the envious looks in their eyes, and that inquisitive tilt of the head. After choosing another leaf, they strolled closer, their long legs covering the distance of several metres in only a few strides.

Mister Pushkin couldn't believe it when the men decided to water the giraffes too! Surely, they were tall enough already? But they were enjoying the drenching just as much as the elephant, lowering their heads so as to be squirted behind the ears.

Gradually, the water slowed, and then stopped, until the hosepipes could only

drip on the men's bare feet. They looked at each other, wondering what had happened, but flinched at the sight of the stern-looking woman who'd just turned off the tap.

The giraffes raised their chins high, and ambled back to the trees, whilst the elephant lifted its trunk in an intentionally rude gesture, trumping loudly so as to reiterate its displeasure.

Something about this woman made Mister Pushkin's luxuriant fur stand on end. Maybe it was the way she chased after the men, swinging her walking stick, telling them off for using too much water? Or maybe it was her long plait of grey hair that wiggled in the breeze like a rat's tail?

At least the men escaped the swinging stick, clambering over a concrete wall to safety, whilst the woman about-turned and scurried towards Klem. Her formal clothes were completely out of place amongst the recreated savannah of open grassland, scattered with skeletal bushes and wispy trees. It reminded Mister Pushkin that, despite the scorching temperature, he wasn't in tropical Africa, but the local zoo.

Now the cat's fur stood on end for a different reason. The amount of static electricity emitted by the woman's grey polyester suit instantly transformed him into an enormous blue porcupine!

'Sorry to keep you waiting. I'm the Head Zookeeper, Miss Seklof,' said the woman, shaking Klem, and then Emma firmly by the hand, displaying a smile of perfect white teeth. 'But you can't get the staff these days.' Her black eyes flicked to the barefooted men, now dragging a sack of bananas to the baboons and chimpanzees. She laughed, 'It'd be quicker to train the monkeys.'

Mister Pushkin, sitting by the woman's square-toed shoes, didn't need his little voice to tell him that she should not be trusted. His nose twitched, detecting her earthy, rather metallic odour, with the slightest hint of drains. He was sure he'd sniffed this peculiar pong somewhere before?

'A-ha! Is *this* the guest of honour?' asked Miss Seklof, her shifty eyes observing the cat backing away, tugging at the leash, pulling Klem with him. 'Mister, err, Pishkin?'

'Mister *Pushkin*,' corrected Klem. 'He's never been to the zoo before...'

'...So we thought we'd treat him,' added Emma, threading her slender arm through Klem's. 'He's only ever seen wild animals on television, and as he's had quite a stressful week...'

'Stressful?' asked Miss Seklof, scratching an angry rash on her neck with her dirty fingernails.

'Yes,' said Klem, 'He was *Exhibit A* in the trial of a notorious cat thief.'

'Of course, I read about it in the newspaper,' said Miss Seklof. 'They compared the cat's fur to strands found on the thief's clothing, and the cat's claws to the scratches on the thief's face.' She narrowed her eyes, 'Because of Mister Pishkin, the man was sent away for *many* years.'

'Best place for him,' thought the cat. He was fed up with that crazy professor stealing him. Sometimes he wished he was an ordinary moggie, like Emma's Bruce, instead of being a valuable pedigree Ukrainian Blue. He also wished this dreadful woman would get his name right.

Miss Seklof reached down to stroke Mister Pushkin, one of her long fingernails almost touching his fur, before he bared his armoury of sharp teeth and growled.

Withdrawing her hand just in time to avoid the slashing claws, she asked, 'Would you like to see our *Panthera Onca*? You can *feed* her if you like?'

'Oh yes,' said Klem and Emma enthusiastically, 'we'd really like to feed her.'

'Good,' said Miss Seklof, rubbing her hands together. 'I was hoping you'd say that.'

Klem tugged the leash, but the cat needed no encouragement to follow them past the monkey cages and towards the jaguar enclosure. 'Look over there,' he said, pointing between the bars to the big black cat sitting in the shade, sheltering from the scorching midday sun. 'A *melanistic* jaguar.'

'A-ha! You know your cats,' declared Miss Seklof. 'And this one's a particularly fine specimen!'

Mister Pushkin growled. He didn't like the sly way the woman was looking at him. And there was something about the way she referred to the jaguar as a 'specimen' that he found unnerving.

Miss Seklof led them to the door, unlocked it and scurried in. 'Don't worry. It's

quite safe,' she stuttered, encouraging the *very* reluctant visitors to follow. She then began her lecture, 'Jaguars look similar to leopards, but they're longer in the face, and more heavily built. Their dark spots form rosettes with small black dots in the centre, and the prominent sagittal crest gives the head a distinctly pointed top. Unlike other cat species, jaguars are not averse to water, and are excellent swimmers.' She added with particular relish, 'Oh, and they have the strongest bite of all big cats, with a pressure of 1500 to 2000 pounds per square inch – strong enough to crush a human skull!'

Mister Pushkin meowed, but Miss Seklof was talking so loudly that nobody could hear him.

It wasn't until the door slammed and the key turned in the lock that his meowing cut through the ensuing silence. When Klem looked at him, he growled, 'Well, I *tried* to warn you.'

**TO BE CONTINUED...**



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