

A Special Child

Once there was a girl called Evie Trench. Evie was not a normal child. She was a 'special' child. That's what her dad said.

Special.

Evie often thought it would be a lot easier to be a normal child than a special child, but there you go. She was *special*.

And the reason for this was . . .

Well, it was complicated. Evie didn't really understand it herself.

Before we get on to her specialness, let's start with a simple fact.

Evie liked animals. Of course, lots of people like animals. But Evie liked *all* animals. Not just the cuddly ones.

She liked dogs and cats, yes, of course, but also cockroaches, snakes, bats, vultures, hyenas, sharks, jellyfish and green anaconda snakes. She liked every animal. Well, apart from the Brazilian wandering spider – the deadliest spider in the world – which even Evie found hard to love,

for reasons that will become clear. But, as a general rule, if it lived, she liked it.

And she knew everything about the animal world. As much as anyone. There were probably professors of Animal Biology at extremely clever universities who knew less than her. By the time she was six years old she had read more than three hundred books on the subject.

Every time she felt worried or sad or bored she would sit and read a book about animals.

So she knew *a lot*.

For instance, she knew that:

1. Snails can sleep for three years in a row and slugs have four noses.



2. A grizzly bear is so strong it can crush a bowling ball.
3. Birds don't find chilli peppers spicy.
4. All clownfish are born boys. (Some turn into girl clownfish later on.)
5. Cats can drink seawater with no problem.
6. An octopus has three hearts.
7. A reindeer's eyes turn blue in winter to help them see in the dark.
8. Elephants are pregnant for nearly two years.
9. Underneath their striped fur, tigers have striped *skin*.

And, her favourite:

10. Sea otters hold hands in their sleep so they don't drift away from each other.

But Evie didn't just *like* animals. She didn't just know *facts* about them.



She also had a very special skill.

A very unusual skill. The skill was this:

She could **HEAR** what animals were thinking.

And sometimes she could get animals to hear what she was thinking.

Without moving her lips or making a sound, Evie could talk to animals.

Evie had no idea how or why she could hear animals. She just could. And, as she got older, it seemed to be happening more and more often. And it was the best thing ever. It was her very own secret superpower. She had only ever told one person she could do this. Her dad. And he'd said that she must never tell anyone about it. Ever.

'You are special, but being special can get you into lots of trouble. Hearing the things you hear can, well . . . it can lead to bad things. Very bad things,' he'd said. 'Trust me. You must never tell anyone. And, whatever you hear, you must never communicate with animals. Never talk back to them. You know, with your mind.'

So she didn't. And no one knew.

Or so she thought.

At least until the day of the rabbit.

A Bird Called Beak

The day of the rabbit began with a bird.
A sparrow, in fact.
The sparrow – a small, reddish-brown ordinary little house sparrow – was called Beak.

Evie had chatted with the sparrow before. Mind-chatted, not mouth-chatted. But it was still chatting.

The bird often came for the seeds Evie left on her windowsill. Evie secretly picked the seeds off the multi-seeded loaf of bread her dad liked to buy.

Evie couldn't always hear the thoughts of animals. Some days she didn't hear the thought of a single creature. But Beak was one of the easiest animals to understand. Not as easy as dogs, but then, no creatures were.

'You seem sad today, Evie,' Beak was thinking, nibbling on seeds, as Evie stared out of her window at the morning sky.

And then Evie showed Beak the photo of her mum she kept by the bed. 'I miss her, Beak.'

‘I miss my mum too,’ Beak said. Not with his beak, but with his mind. ‘To be fair, I only knew her for a short time, but she seemed great.’

‘I never knew mine either. I mean, I can’t really remember her. I get all my information from Granny Flora. And Dad, of course. Though not as much as you’d think from him. Is that strange? To miss things you never really knew?’

‘Not at all. I miss all my friends I haven’t made yet. And I have thousands of friends already. We fly around together. But I am still new. Young. I have not lived through a winter yet. There will be many more friends I will make. And I miss them. Because I am sure they will be special.’

Evie tried not to feel sad. ‘What’s it like to fly, Beak?’

‘It’s the easiest thing in the world. If you have wings. It’s like freedom. To be able to go up and down and side to side and anywhere you want, with the wind rushing through your feathers, eating whatever flying insects come your way. You would like it, Evie.’

‘I think I would. Apart from the eating insects part.’

‘There is nothing like being free to be

yourself,' Beak added. 'If you have wings, you might as well use them.'

'Hmm. So I hear.'

And it was at that moment that her dad knocked on her door and pushed it open a little. Beak's tiny head jerked around.

'Uh-oh,' thought Beak.

'Come on, Evie, you should be ready for school by now,' Evie's dad said as he peeked his head through the door. He noticed the open window and the sparrow flying off into the sky.

He also saw the seeds on the windowsill. 'Evie, what have I told you about taking seeds off the bread to feed the birds?'

'I'm sorry, Dad. It was just, if I'm not allowed a pet I . . .'

'You weren't trying to talk to that bird, were you? With your mind, I mean?'

'No,' Evie lied. She had to. Her dad had made it *very clear* that she should always ignore the voices of animals that entered her mind because they would lead to **VERY BAD THINGS**.



Though he didn't tell her what those bad things might be. Which was annoying. Especially as Evie really, really did want a pet. 'I wasn't talking to the bird.'

'Good,' her dad said. He seemed tired. He had been working late, repairing other people's furniture in the garage. Maybe he was missing Mum, too. It was hard to tell. Evie wished her dad was as easy to understand as a dog.

It was a wish she had often. If he could just turn into a dog for a little while . . . If he was a dog, then she would understand him. A big slobbery bloodhound. The thing with dogs is that they can't help but tell you things. A kind of talking, but not with their mouths the way humans talk. You don't even have to read their minds to realise they are talking all the time. Every wag, every bark, every whimper, every tilt of the head, every soft stare, every breath and every pant is a kind of talking. It is saying something. Humans aren't often like that. Maybe that is why humans need words. Maybe it is just too hard to understand each other without them.

And dads, in particular, are one of the most complicated types of animal in existence.

'Now,' he said. 'School.'

A Rabbit in Need

A few hours later, Evie was sitting next to her best friend, Leonora Brightside, in the canteen of Lofting Primary School.

Evie was eating her vegetable lasagne, listening to Leonora talk about her new puppy. It was a Maltese terrier called Bibi. She had a picture on her phone.

Leonora's parents were famous vloggers. Their channel – LIFE ON THE BRIGHTSIDE – had two million subscribers on YouTube. Leonora had been starring in their videos since literally the day she was born, as her birth was filmed for one of the most popular episodes, 'Our Little Girl', which had been viewed 17,637,239 times.

'Mum did some research and found that Maltese terriers are the cutest breed according to internet users and would get us more hits. My dad is highly allergic to dogs but Mum says that he'll just have to sneeze. And, anyway, Bibi isn't making him sneeze.'

Evie knew why, of course. ‘They’re hypoallergenic, because they don’t molt.’

‘Ah,’ said Leonora, eating her packed lunch of sushi rolls. ‘You should come around and see her! Tonight! You’ll love her. I mean, you love all animals, I know. Even the ugly ones. Even cockroaches. So you’re going to love Bibi. She is totally *adorbs*. You could even be in a video! If, you know, you sorted your hair out a bit.’

‘What’s wrong with my hair?’

‘It’s just a bit, you know, *dull*.’

‘Is it? I just thought it was hair,’ said Evie, who never really gave too much thought to her appearance. She was tall-ish, for an eleven-year-old, with a small-ish nose and wide-ish eyes. It was all very *ish*. But everyone always said she had a ‘kind smile’ or a ‘wise smile’, which she supposed was better than having an unkind or stupid smile. But anyway, the one thing she really was okay about was her brown(ish) hair, because it was exactly the same shade and straightness as her mum’s in all the photos.

‘Hahahahahaha,’ laughed Leonora, taking filtered selfies of herself as a unicorn. A unicorn eating sushi. ‘You are **FUNNY**, Evie. I love you so much. But don’t worry, *it’s what’s on the*

inside that counts. That's what Jay, dad's fitness instructor, says. Mind you, he is a male model.'

Evie shrugged. She sometimes didn't have words for Leonora. Like Leonora's words were water and she had to hold her breath for a while and just wait for them to end. Evie occasionally wondered why she was friends with Leonora, as she always made her feel bad about herself.

After lunch, Evie wanted to be on her own. So she decided to go to the school library. She *loved* the school library because it had a very large collection of books about nature and wildlife and animals. She remembered she had a book to take back. And the book was the *Encyclopaedia of Endangered Species*.

She had read it from cover to cover in two days and had got cross when she'd found out about all the different types of tiger that were already extinct, and that all the other types were only just hanging on. She had got crosser when she had read about leatherback sea turtles – the largest type of sea turtle – nearly being extinct, because they had been around for 110 million years, since the dinosaurs. As modern human beings had only been in existence for

200,000 years – which was nowhere near even *one* million years – it seemed a bit cheeky of us – *rude*, even – to be endangering all these other animals who had got here first and had been doing perfectly okay without us. Well, that’s what Evie thought.

So there she was, on her own, holding the encyclopaedia and walking through the school corridors towards the library, when she passed Kahlo.

Kahlo was the new school rabbit. She was named after the famous Mexican artist Frida Kahlo, for some strange reason. She lived in a hutch just outside the school secretary’s office.

The only time she had heard Kahlo think something was yesterday when she had been with Leonora. The rabbit had been at her water bottle and Evie had heard her say, ‘Oh no.’ But because she’d been with Leonora Evie hadn’t stopped to check if Kahlo was okay.

But now, Evie heard a thought again.

A voice, a whisper, a whine, a *something*.

Evie turned.

‘There’s another one,’ thought Kahlo to herself. ‘Walking straight past. Not a care in the world.’

Evie stopped.

‘Oh, this is no good. They’ll die without me.’

Evie stared intensely at the rabbit. She found that, rather than closing her eyes, if she stared intensely at a creature, it was more likely to hear her thoughts.

‘Kahlo, what is the matter?’ she asked silently, as a couple of boys in the year below walked past, nudging each other and giggling about why Evie was standing staring at a rabbit.

The rabbit didn’t notice the question, so Evie thought it again. She even whispered it to herself to make sure the thought was precise and clear in her mind.

‘Kahlo. What. Is. The. Matter?’

Kahlo looked up and made eye contact with Evie. She had a sweet but sad face, with ears that pressed against the roof of the hutch.

‘You understand what’s in my head?’ thought-asked the rabbit.

‘Yes.’

‘I’ve never seen a human do that. Other animals, all the time . . . But a human? That must be rare.’

Evie knew that was the case. A cat had once told her that it was because humans were too arrogant – which was a bit rich, coming from a cat.

The rabbit pressed her grey-brown face against the wires of the hutch and pleaded with her dark, shining, desperate eyes.

‘I am not meant to be here. I belong in the woods. I was taken from the Forest of Holes. I belong in the warren. I belong with my colony.’

‘The Forest of Holes?’

‘Yes. It’s very near. I was stolen by Brenda.’

‘Brenda? Who on earth is Brenda?’

‘Brenda. Brenda Baxter.’

Evie smiled. ‘Mrs Baxter’s a Brenda? Amazing. Brenda Baxter.’ But then she realised what Kahlo had just said. ‘Mrs Baxter, the head teacher stole you from the wild?’

‘Yup.’

‘That’s terrible! She wouldn’t do something like that!’

‘Well, it’s true. Rabbits don’t lie. I was kidnapped. She took me. And I need to go back. I’ve got all my family. I’ve still got my mum. Do you know what it’s like to be away from your mum?’

Evie felt a deep, familiar sadness. ‘More than anything,’ she said.

‘Please. She’s only two hundred hops away. Hopping! How I miss hopping! But I can

hardly do a hop in here without bashing my head. You've got to help me. You're the only one who can hear me.'

Evie felt worried all of a sudden. She looked around. No one was there. 'How do you want me to help you?'

'You have to get me out of here.'