

Василий Мантуленко

**Сборник
рассказов на
Английском
языке**

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Аннотация

Сборник из 50 оригинальных рассказов на английском языке уровня C1 (Advanced) для внеклассного чтения в школах с углублённым изучением английского. Каждый рассказ — компактная, законченная история объёмом на два печатных разворота, объединяющая три сквозные темы: дружбу, животных и лёгкий, добрый юмор. Тексты написаны живым, современным языком с разговорными оборотами и разнообразной лексикой, но без архаизмов и узкоспециальных терминов — идеально для самостоятельного чтения старшеклассников и студентов языковых курсов. После каждого рассказа — два вопроса для обсуждения, которые можно использовать на уроке, для письменной работы или для саморефлексии. Книга подойдёт учителям английского языка, репетиторам, школьникам 8–11 классов и всем, кто совершенствует навыки чтения на уровне C1.

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Василий Мантуленко

Сборник рассказов

на Английском языке

PAWS, LAUGHS & LOYALTY

50 Stories about Friendship, Animals, and Humour

An Extracurricular Reader for English-Language Schools

Level: C1 (Advanced)

Annotation

This collection brings together fifty short, original stories written for advanced (CEFR C1) learners of English. Each story is self-contained and can be read independently, in any order, in roughly the time of a single lesson or homework session. The stories draw on three recurring themes — friendship, animals, and everyday humour — and are intended for extracurricular reading in schools with an in-depth English programme.

Each story ends with two short discussion questions suitable for classroom conversation, written work, or independent reflection. Vocabulary and sentence structure are pitched at C1 level: learners should expect some idiomatic expressions, varied sentence length, and a wide working vocabulary, but no highly specialised or archaic language.

This edition contains the complete set of fifty stories.

Contents

Fifty stories, in five thematic groups of ten

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Humour

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50. The Last Day of Camp Kestrel *Friendship / Animals / Humour*

1. The Cat Who Ran for Mayor

Humour / Animals

Nobody in the small town of Little Hollow could remember exactly whose idea it had been, but by the time the local election rolled around, a ginger cat named Biscuit had somehow become a registered candidate for mayor. It began, as these things often do, as a joke among the regulars at Maple Street Café. Biscuit had a habit of sitting in the café window, surveying the street with an expression of profound disapproval, and one rainy afternoon someone joked that he looked more competent than either of the actual candidates. Within a week, someone had printed posters. Within two, Biscuit had more supporters than anyone cared to admit.

Fifteen-year-old Priya, who lived above the café with her grandmother, was the one who ended up managing the campaign, mostly because she was the only person willing to take it seriously enough to do the paperwork. She found herself explaining to the county clerk, with a completely straight face, that yes, the candidate did indeed meet the residency requirement, having lived at the same address for his entire life. The clerk, an unflappable man named Mr. Doyle, simply raised an eyebrow and stamped the form. "Every town needs a bit of nonsense," he said. "Might as well be organised nonsense."

What surprised Priya was how the joke slowly stopped being

only a joke. Biscuit's "policies" — dreamed up by her and her best friend Tomasz over long afternoons on her balcony — were mostly gentle jabs at the real candidates, who had spent months arguing about a proposed car park while ignoring the fact that the town's only playground had a broken swing. "Biscuit promises more naps for everyone and fewer arguments about parking," read one poster. It was meant to be funny. But underneath the joke was something true: people were tired of politicians who talked past each other, and a cat, whatever his limitations, could not talk past anyone.

Tomasz, who was hopeless at drawing but insisted on designing the posters anyway, produced a portrait of Biscuit wearing a tiny paper crown that looked less like royalty and more like a party hat that had lost an argument with gravity. Priya kept meaning to redo it properly. She never did, and in the end the crooked crown became the campaign's unofficial symbol, printed on badges that half the town wore, including, to everyone's astonishment, the actual sitting mayor.

The two actual candidates reacted to their unexpected rival in strikingly different ways. Councillor Briggs, who had held the seat for nine years and treated every question as a personal insult, refused even to acknowledge Biscuit's existence, which only made the joke funnier to everyone watching. His opponent, Ms. Okafor, a softly spoken teacher who had never run for anything before, took the opposite approach: she turned up to the café one afternoon, ordered a coffee, and asked Priya, entirely

seriously, whether Biscuit might consider an endorsement. "He's a cat," Priya said. "I'm aware," Ms. Okafor replied. "I'd still like the badge."

By the third week, the campaign had acquired its own peculiar momentum. Tomasz organised a "town hall," held in the café itself, at which Biscuit sat on a cushioned chair at the head of the table while Priya fielded questions on his behalf, translating his silence into policy with the deadpan confidence of a professional spokesperson. Someone asked about drainage on Elm Street. "Biscuit is deeply concerned about the drainage on Elm Street," Priya announced, while Biscuit licked a paw, utterly unconcerned about anything. The room, packed rather more tightly than anyone had expected for a joke event, laughed until several people had to wipe their eyes.

Not everyone found it funny. A letter arrived at the local paper, signed only "A Concerned Resident," accusing the whole business of making a mockery of civic responsibility at a time when the town faced real problems. Priya read it twice, stung, and considered quietly withdrawing Biscuit's name before the vote. It was her grandmother, of all people, who talked her out of it, pointing out that the letter had at least gotten more people reading about the actual issues — the playground, the drainage, the years of stalled arguments — than either candidate's official leaflets ever had. "Sometimes," her grandmother said, "you need something silly to make people look at something serious."

On election night, Biscuit did not win, of course — write-in

votes for a cat are not, whatever anyone hoped, legally binding — but he received an almost respectable four hundred and twelve votes, enough that the local paper ran the story on its front page under the headline "CAT NARROWLY LOSES, DIGNITY INTACT." More importantly, the actual winner, Ms. Okafor, stood up at her victory speech and promised, with a completely serious face, that fixing the playground swing would be the first item on her agenda, "since Biscuit's campaign was, if nothing else, right about that."

Councillor Briggs, defeated and visibly displeased about losing to a teacher he had never taken seriously, muttered something to a reporter about the whole election having been "undermined by novelty candidates," a complaint the paper printed in full, next to a photograph of Biscuit asleep in the café window, magnificently unbothered by the accusation. Priya cut that page out too, and pinned it beside the front-page headline, so that anyone reading the framed clippings would understand exactly how seriously some people had taken a cat's imaginary candidacy.

The local radio station, sensing a good story, invited Priya on air the following weekend, and she found herself, rather to her own astonishment, fielding questions from the host with the same deadpan confidence she had used at the town hall, explaining Biscuit's "platform" as though it were the most natural thing in the world for a cat to have policy positions. Ms. Okafor called in halfway through to congratulate her, live, on running "the most

honest campaign this town has seen in a decade," a compliment that made Priya blush so hard Tomasz later claimed you could hear it over the radio.

Priya framed the front page and hung it in the café, next to the window where Biscuit still sat every afternoon, watching the street with the same look of quiet disapproval, entirely unaware that he had, for one strange autumn, been the most popular figure in Little Hollow. Tomasz suggested they run him again in four years, and had already, rather worryingly, begun sketching a new and even more asymmetrical crown. Priya said they'd see. Neither of them really doubted that they would.

Discussion Questions

1. Why do you think the joke campaign eventually influenced something real in the town?

2. In your own words, explain what Mr. Doyle means by "organised nonsense." Do you agree that towns need this?

2. A Parrot with a Grudge

Humour / Animals

Mrs. Alvarez had owned Ferdinand the African Grey parrot for eleven years, and in that time he had learned to say a great many things, most of them acquired from her nephew Diego, who visited every summer and apparently could not go five minutes without swearing at video games. By the time Diego was seventeen, Ferdinand's vocabulary was, in Mrs. Alvarez's words, "broad, colourful, and entirely his own fault."

This would have remained a private embarrassment had Ferdinand not developed, that particular July, a grudge against Diego's new friend Samuel, whom Diego had brought round twice and who had made the fatal error of laughing at the bird the first time he squawked something unrepeatable. Parrots, it turns out, remember insults with the precision of accountants. From then on, whenever Samuel appeared, Ferdinand would puff himself up to twice his size, fix him with one round yellow eye, and deliver, in a voice uncannily like Diego's, a string of commentary that made Mrs. Alvarez choke on her tea and made Samuel go the colour of a tomato.

Diego found this hilarious for approximately the first four visits. By the fifth, he had started to worry that Samuel, who was new to the neighbourhood and did not yet have many friends, might stop coming round altogether rather than face the

bird's judgement one more time. So Diego did what any self-respecting seventeen-year-old with an unhelpful parrot does: he consulted the internet, found several contradictory articles about "reconditioning parrot behaviour," and settled on a plan that mostly involved bribing Ferdinand with sunflower seeds every time Samuel entered the room without incident.

It did not work quickly. For two weeks, Ferdinand accepted the seeds with the air of a bird taking a bribe under protest, and insulted Samuel anyway, seeds or no seeds. Mrs. Alvarez, watching this small domestic drama unfold from her armchair, offered the unhelpful observation that Ferdinand had once held an identical grudge against the postman for nearly a year, over a delivery mishap nobody could even remember the details of any more, and had only relented once the postman started greeting him by name every single morning without fail, rain or shine, for months on end. "He doesn't forgive quickly," she said, "but he does eventually forgive thoroughly."

Samuel, to his credit, took the postman story as a kind of instruction manual. He started bringing his own seeds, offering them himself rather than leaving it to Diego, and eventually just talking to the parrot directly, in the low, patient voice you might use with someone who had been badly hurt once and had trust issues as a result. "I know I laughed," he told Ferdinand one afternoon, entirely seriously, while Diego watched from the doorway trying not to laugh himself. "I shouldn't have. You're allowed to be annoyed. I'd just like it if we could move on."

Ferdinand responded by biting the proffered seed clean in half and hurling the other portion to the floor, which Samuel, with impressive optimism, chose to interpret as partial progress.

There were setbacks. One Saturday, Diego made the mistake of laughing himself at something Ferdinand said mid-tirade, and the bird, apparently deciding the entire visit was a conspiracy against him, refused to come out of his cage for the rest of the afternoon, sulking with a theatrical thoroughness that Mrs. Alvarez said reminded her uncomfortably of Diego's own teenage strops. Samuel apologised again the following week regardless, bringing an extra-large bag of seeds by way of what he called "compound interest on the apology," a phrase Ferdinand naturally could not appreciate but which made Mrs. Alvarez laugh so hard she had to sit down.

Whether Ferdinand understood a word of any of it is, naturally, impossible to know. But something shifted. By August, he had reduced his commentary to an occasional muttered remark, delivered without real venom, more habit than hostility, and by the time Samuel left for university that September, Ferdinand had taken to whistling the first three notes of Samuel's ringtone whenever his phone buzzed, which Mrs. Alvarez took as the closest thing to an apology the bird was ever going to offer.

Diego, meanwhile, found himself oddly moved by the whole business, and began to wonder, not entirely as a joke, whether Ferdinand's grudge had actually taught him something about his own friendships — the way a single careless laugh could linger

far longer than the person who'd laughed ever realised, and the way patient, unglamorous effort, repeated often enough, could eventually wear even the most stubborn resentment down to nothing. He mentioned this once to Samuel, who considered it for a moment and said only, "I think you're giving the parrot too much credit," before admitting, a beat later, that he thought about it rather often himself.

By the time Diego left for his own first year of university the following autumn, Ferdinand had become something of a fixture in both boys' phone conversations, a running joke that outlasted the original grudge by a wide margin. Mrs. Alvarez took to sending photographic updates of Ferdinand's antics to both boys equally, insisting, with the quiet satisfaction of a woman who had watched the whole saga unfold from her armchair, that the bird had done more for their friendship than either of them had managed on their own.

Mrs. Alvarez, for her part, kept a small notebook of Ferdinand's vocabulary over the years, half out of amusement and half, she admitted, as a kind of insurance policy in case any future visitor complained. She showed Diego the entry from that particular summer once, a single line reading only "July: hostilities with S. Peace talks ongoing," written, she said, entirely straight-faced, the week Samuel first started bringing his own seeds, as though she had been tracking a genuine diplomatic negotiation rather than a teenager's attempts to win over an irritable parrot.

Diego still isn't sure whether the sunflower seeds worked, or the patience, or simply time. What he is sure of is that Samuel, who now calls Ferdinand "my old rival" with real affection, sends the bird a bag of unsalted peanuts every Christmas, addressed, without irony, to "Ferdinand Alvarez, Esq." Mrs. Alvarez reads the label aloud to Ferdinand each year, and swears, though nobody quite believes her, that he always listens all the way to the end before losing interest.

Discussion Questions

- 1. What does Samuel's approach to Ferdinand suggest about how to repair a damaged relationship?*
- 2. Find two idiomatic or colloquial expressions in the text and explain what they mean in context.*

3. The Tortoise and the Skateboard

Animals / Friendship

It is a truth universally acknowledged among ten-year-olds that a tortoise is, in almost every respect, a disappointing pet. It does not fetch. It does not perform tricks. It regards the world with the placid indifference of a creature that has survived several ice ages through sheer stubbornness. Leo knew all of this when his grandfather gave him Norman the tortoise for his tenth birthday, and he had spent the better part of a year quietly resenting the gift, comparing his lot unfavourably with his friend Aisha, whose dog Rocket could catch a frisbee in mid-air and generally behaved like something out of an advertisement.

The turning point came, unexpectedly, on a Tuesday in April, when Leo's skateboard rolled off the garden path and came to rest, quite by accident, directly against Norman's shell. Norman, for reasons no one has ever satisfactorily explained, did not retreat into his shell as tortoises are famously supposed to do. Instead he pushed forward, very slowly, and the skateboard rolled a few centimetres across the patio. Leo, who happened to be watching, laughed so hard he had to sit down.

What followed was three weeks of increasingly elaborate experimentation. Leo built Norman a small wooden ramp out of an old shelf his grandfather had been meaning to throw away, painting it a garish shade of green that Aisha, arriving to inspect

the project, declared "aggressively festive." She was sceptical at first, folding her arms in the manner of someone who suspected she was about to waste an entire Saturday, but by the second attempt she had abandoned scepticism entirely and was lying flat on the patio, filming Norman's progress on her phone with the dedication of a wildlife documentary crew.

Together they constructed what Leo, with the grandiosity only a ten-year-old can summon, referred to as "the Norman Grand Prix": a chalk-marked course around the garden that Norman navigated, at his own considerable leisure, while pushing a specially adapted mini-skateboard with his front legs. He was, it must be said, extraordinarily bad at it. He frequently lost interest halfway round the course and wandered off towards the lettuce patch instead. Once, memorably, he fell asleep mid-race, prompting a twenty-minute intermission during which Leo and Aisha argued, with enormous seriousness, about whether a sleeping competitor should be disqualified or simply awarded extra time.

Rocket, meanwhile, showed an entirely unexpected interest in the proceedings, trotting alongside the chalk course each afternoon with his ears pricked, occasionally attempting to nudge Norman along with his nose in what Aisha swore was encouragement and Leo suspected was simple impatience. Far from being jealous of the tortoise stealing his afternoons, Rocket appeared to adopt Norman as a sort of ongoing personal project, standing guard at the finish line and greeting each achingly slow

completion with a single, dignified bark, as though officiating his own small awards ceremony.

None of this mattered in the slightest to the question of speed. Rocket, for all his frisbee-catching brilliance, had never once made either of them laugh the way Norman did, wobbling determinedly across the patio at a pace that would have embarrassed a garden snail, entirely unbothered by his own incompetence. There is something contagious about a creature who simply does not care whether he is good at something, and Leo found himself, for the first time since the tortoise arrived, genuinely looking forward to afternoons in the garden.

By summer, word had spread around the street, and Norman had something of a small local following. Neighbours would stop by the fence specifically to watch him fail spectacularly at the Grand Prix, placing entirely unofficial bets on his finishing time and cheering, without a trace of irony, when he occasionally managed to complete a full lap without falling asleep or defecting to the lettuce patch. Leo's grandfather, watching from the kitchen window, allowed himself a quiet, satisfied smile — the exact smile, Leo's mother said later, of a man who had known all along exactly what he was doing when he chose that particular birthday gift.

Aisha's parents, watching the whole spectacle develop over their fence, eventually asked whether Rocket could join the Grand Prix as an honorary official rather than a competitor, a suggestion Aisha embraced with tremendous enthusiasm,

designing him a small cardboard medal that read "HEAD OF SECURITY" in glitter pen, which he wore, with evident pride, for the remainder of the summer, guarding Norman's chalk-marked track from the neighbour's cat with a seriousness entirely disproportionate to the actual stakes involved.

By the final weekend before school started again, the Grand Prix had become something of a genuine local tradition, complete with a scoreboard Leo kept with scrupulous, entirely meaningless precision, and a small crowd of regulars who brought their own garden chairs. Leo's grandfather was persuaded, after considerable pressure, to award a trophy — an old teacup, repurposed for the occasion — to Norman for what the engraved paper label, in Leo's careful handwriting, called "Outstanding Achievement in Not Caring At All."

Word of the trophy ceremony reached Leo's school by September, thanks largely to Aisha's enthusiastic retelling, and for a brief, glorious fortnight Leo found himself the most sought-after storyteller in his year group, cornered at every break time by classmates demanding to know whether it was really true that a tortoise had a fan club, a scoreboard, and an official Head of Security. Leo, who had spent a full year quietly wishing for a more impressive pet, discovered he rather enjoyed being the person with the strangest and most delightful story to tell.

Leo never did teach Norman to fetch. He stopped minding. Some of the best friendships, he told Aisha that August, watching Rocket nudge a dozing Norman gently back onto the course, are

with someone who is spectacularly bad at the thing you built together, and joyfully unconcerned about it — and, he added after a moment's thought, some of the best friendships are the unexpected ones a fast, clever dog forms with an exceptionally slow tortoise, for reasons neither of them will ever be able to explain.

Discussion Questions

- 1. Why does Leo's opinion of Norman change over the course of the story?*
- 2. What point do you think the story is making about what makes a good companion?*

4. Best Friends and the Missing Sandwich

Friendship / Humour

The Great Sandwich Incident, as it came to be known for the rest of the school year, began with a single missing egg-and-cress sandwich and ended with the near-total collapse of a twelve-year friendship, a school-wide investigation involving three separate suspects, and a confession delivered, somewhat theatrically, from the top of the gymnasium climbing frame.

Nadia and Grace had been inseparable since primary school, the sort of friendship built on shared jokes so old that neither could quite remember their origins any more. Every day at lunch, without fail, Nadia brought exactly one egg-and-cress sandwich, cut into precise triangles by her father, and every day she left it, unattended and supposedly safe, on the third shelf of the shared classroom fridge while she went to choir practice. On the Thursday in question, it was gone.

What made the theft so wounding was not the sandwich itself — Nadia could, after all, have bought crisps from the tuck shop — but the timing. It disappeared on the exact day Nadia had planned to tell Grace some genuinely important news: that her parents were separating, and she and her mother would be moving across town at the end of term. She had been building

up the courage all week, and had planned, in the small, illogical way that grief organises itself around trivial rituals, to tell Grace over that particular sandwich, at their particular bench, as they had eaten lunch together nearly every day since they were seven.

When the sandwich vanished, so did Nadia's courage, and in its place arrived a fury entirely out of proportion to a piece of missing bread. She accused, in quick succession, a boy named Fergus who had a well-documented weakness for cress, the school's evidently opportunistic resident squirrel, and finally, unforgivably, Grace herself, on the flimsy grounds that Grace had once, months earlier, admitted to liking egg sandwiches "in theory."

Fergus, cornered by an unusually intense Nadia at the lockers, protested his innocence with such wounded indignation that a small crowd gathered, several of whom began, entirely unhelpfully, taking sides in a dispute they understood nothing about. Someone suggested reviewing the corridor's solitary, notoriously unreliable security camera, which turned out to show nothing more incriminating than the fridge door swinging shut on its own, a detail that satisfied no one and merely deepened the mystery to legendary proportions by the end of registration.

Grace, wounded and bewildered by an accusation she couldn't begin to understand, might reasonably have ended the friendship there. Instead, with the patience of someone who has known another person long enough to recognise when their anger is actually about something else entirely, she sat down next to

Nadia at the bottom of the empty climbing frame — Nadia had retreated to the top in a fit of dramatic solitude — and simply waited. Several younger pupils gathered at a safe distance, clearly hoping for a spectacle, until a passing teacher shooed them off with the weary efficiency of someone who had broken up a hundred such gatherings before.

It took forty minutes and, eventually, Nadia climbed down, and told her everything: the separation, the move, the sandwich that had somehow become the one stable thing she could hold onto while the rest of her life rearranged itself without her permission. Grace didn't say very much in response, which Nadia would later say was exactly right; she simply put an arm around her and let the silence do whatever work silence needed to do, and the two of them sat there long after the bell had rung for the next lesson, neither particularly caring about the lateness mark that would inevitably follow.

The actual culprit, it emerged the following week, was a supply teacher who had assumed the unlabelled sandwich was communal staffroom food, and who apologised with real mortification once the matter came to light, offering to replace it three times over as if quantity might somehow compensate for the emotional chaos the disappearance had unleashed. Fergus, magnanimous in vindication, accepted a replacement sandwich on Nadia's behalf and ate it himself, which everyone agreed was a fitting, if slightly petty, conclusion to his ordeal.

The choir teacher, hearing an abridged version of events

secondhand, quietly rearranged the rehearsal schedule so Nadia could skip the sessions closest to moving day without any awkward explanations required, a small kindness Nadia only found out about months later and which she said, when she finally did, explained rather a lot about why choir had always felt like a safe place to disappear into for half an hour.

The move itself, when it finally came, was smaller and less dramatic than either girl had feared. Grace arrived early on the Saturday with a flask of tea and absolutely no useful packing skills whatsoever, and spent most of the morning being handed boxes she then put down in entirely the wrong rooms, a running joke that kept both of them laughing through what might otherwise have been a thoroughly miserable day. By the time the removal van pulled away, they had already agreed on a bus route between their two halves of town that took exactly thirty-four minutes, a fact Nadia recited to her mother that evening as though it were the most reassuring statistic in the world.

Nadia's father, hearing the full story rather later than he probably should have, took to slipping an extra sandwich into the bag "for Grace, just in case," a habit he continued long after the move, technically unnecessary now that the sandwiches travelled by bus rather than fridge, but which neither girl ever asked him to stop, since it had quietly become, without either of them quite planning it, a small standing reminder that someone in the background was still looking out for both of them.

But by then it scarcely mattered who had taken the sandwich

at all. Grace had started walking Nadia home twice a week to help her pack, wrapping ornaments in newspaper and arguing cheerfully over which of Nadia's childhood drawings deserved to survive the move, and the two of them had invented a new ritual — a shared sandwich, cut into four triangles instead of three, eaten on the same bench regardless of which side of town either of them now lived on, a small stubborn insistence that some things, at least, did not have to change.

Discussion Questions

- 1. Why does Nadia direct her anger at the sandwich instead of talking about the real problem?*
- 2. How does Grace's reaction show a mature understanding of friendship?*

5. Grandpa's Goat Business

Animals / Humour

When Grandpa Henryk retired from forty years as a postal worker, he announced, over Sunday dinner and with no discernible warning, that he intended to start a business renting out goats for "eco-friendly garden clearance." The family's reaction ranged from polite scepticism to open horror, the latter mostly from Grandpa's daughter, who had grown up watching her father's previous retirement schemes — a short-lived alpaca farm, an even shorter-lived attempt at competitive beekeeping — collapse with varying degrees of chaos.

His granddaughter Effie, sixteen and perpetually short of pocket money, volunteered to help, partly out of genuine curiosity and partly because Grandpa was offering actual wages, a rarity among the adults in her life. The business, which Grandpa insisted on calling "Henryk's Humble Herd" despite Effie's repeated suggestions of something less alliterative, consisted of exactly four goats — Prince, Nutmeg, Delilah, and a bad-tempered animal named simply The General — who were driven, in a trailer Grandpa had bought secondhand and never quite finished repainting, to overgrown gardens across the county to eat everything in sight.

It worked, to everyone's genuine surprise, rather well. Overgrown brambles, it turns out, are exactly the sort of

thing goats find irresistible, and word spread quickly among homeowners tired of paying for expensive machinery to clear land that four determined animals could handle for a fraction of the price and considerably more entertainment value. Effie's job, officially, was "herd logistics," which in practice meant chasing The General out of neighbours' vegetable patches at least twice a week and developing an encyclopaedic knowledge of which garden gates the goats could, against all apparent physics, unlatch themselves.

The first few jobs were modest — an overgrown allotment here, a brambled slope behind a retirement home there — and Effie found herself surprised by how much she enjoyed the work, standing in unfamiliar gardens with a clipboard, timing how long it took Prince and Nutmeg to demolish a hedge that would otherwise have taken a professional gardener the better part of a week. Delilah, the gentlest of the four, took to nudging Effie's pockets in search of treats with such persistence that Effie began, without quite admitting it to her grandfather, bringing extra apple slices specifically for her.

The General, meanwhile, developed an early and entirely one-sided rivalry with Effie personally, treating every attempt to guide him back into the trailer as a personal challenge to be resisted on principle. Effie spent one memorable Saturday chasing him around a client's ornamental pond for the better part of an hour, to the vocal amusement of the homeowner, who eventually abandoned any pretence of professional composure

and simply filmed the entire pursuit on his phone, later posting it online under the caption "best gardening service in the county, hands down."

The business nearly ended in its third month, when The General escaped during a job at the vicarage and consumed, with methodical and unhurried satisfaction, most of the flowers intended for a wedding taking place that same afternoon. Grandpa, mortified, offered to pay for replacement flowers on the spot, while Effie, equally mortified, spent a frantic twenty minutes attempting to herd The General away from the one remaining rosebush using nothing but a garden broom and a stream of language she was fairly sure her grandfather had never taught her.

The bride, when she eventually saw the damage, laughed so hard she had to be helped to a chair, and later told the local paper that a goat eating her wedding flowers was, without question, the best story she would ever have to tell about her big day. She insisted, over Grandpa's continued apologies, on having a photograph taken with The General before the ceremony, the goat standing beside her in the wedding photographs with the serene, unbothered expression of an animal entirely unaware of the reputation he had just built for himself.

That story, printed with a photograph of The General looking entirely unrepentant, did more for Henryk's Humble Herd than any advertisement could have managed. Bookings tripled within the month. Effie's mother, watching her father's business finally,

improbably, succeed after two previous failures, admitted to Effie one evening that she had never actually doubted him — she had simply run out of ways to worry productively about a man who was going to try these things regardless of what anyone said.

Grandpa, characteristically, refused to take much credit for the turnaround, insisting instead that the real hero of the story was the bride herself, for having the good grace to laugh instead of demanding compensation through a solicitor, an outcome he admitted, quietly, he had spent the whole drive home fully expecting. He sent her a jar of honey from Mr. Ferreira down the road as a thank-you gift, along with a hand-written note apologising, with a straight face, "on behalf of The General, who remains entirely unrepentant."

The business has since expanded to eight goats and a small waiting list, and Effie, now planning to study veterinary science at university, credits those two chaotic summers with teaching her more about animal behaviour than any textbook has managed since, though she is quick to add that no lecture has yet come close to matching the specific horror and delight of watching The General survey a bride's ceremonial flower arch with the calm, calculating eye of a professional critic about to deliver a very unwelcome verdict.

The vicarage wedding photographs, framed copies of which now hang, with the couple's cheerful permission, on the wall of the Whitmore family's kitchen, remain Grandpa's proudest possession, and he has been known to point them out to any

visitor who lingers near the kitchen table for longer than about ninety seconds, whether or not they have expressed the slightest interest in hearing the full story of The General's one and only wedding appearance.

Effie still works weekends for her grandfather, still chasing The General out of places he shouldn't be, and has come to understand something her grandfather apparently knew all along: that the difference between a foolish idea and a good one is sometimes only a matter of which one you're stubborn enough to see through, and that a goat eating the wrong flowers at exactly the wrong moment can, against all reasonable expectation, turn out to be the best thing that ever happened to a struggling little business.

Discussion Questions

- 1. What does the story suggest about the relationship between failure and eventual success?*
- 2. Why might the author have chosen a goat, specifically, as the animal at the centre of this story?*

6. The Hedgehog in the Post Box

Animals / Humour

The Whitmore family post box had, for as long as anyone could remember, been a perfectly ordinary metal container attached to a perfectly ordinary garden gate. This changed one October evening when twelve-year-old Oliver, retrieving a parcel, discovered a hedgehog curled at the bottom of it, apparently having climbed in through the small gap at the base in search of shelter and then found the smooth metal walls entirely impossible to climb back out of.

Oliver named him Postman almost immediately, over his older sister Jess's strenuous objections that naming a wild animal was "exactly the sort of thing that leads to disaster," a prediction that would prove, over the following fortnight, to be almost entirely accurate. Postman, once rescued and examined by a slightly baffled local vet who confirmed he was healthy but clearly not going anywhere in a hurry given the encroaching cold, became something of a fixture in the Whitmore garden, spending his days asleep in a box lined with straw and his nights doing whatever hedgehogs do, which appeared to consist mainly of eating enormous quantities of cat food and occasionally getting stuck under the shed.

Jess, despite her objections, turned out to be the one who researched hedgehog care most thoroughly, printing out

feeding schedules and hibernation guidelines with the grim determination of someone who fully expected to be proven right eventually and wanted the evidence ready when she was. She would never admit, then or later, that she had also spent one entire Sunday afternoon sitting quietly by Postman's box, simply watching him sleep, an activity she insisted to Oliver was "purely diagnostic."

The trouble began when Oliver's best friend Kwame, visiting for the weekend, became so enamoured of Postman that he insisted on bringing his entire class in for a nature project the following Monday, an idea that seemed, at the time, entirely reasonable, and turned out, in practice, to involve twenty-eight extremely enthusiastic ten-year-olds, one escaped hedgehog, and a full afternoon spent searching every flowerbed on the street while Oliver's mother stood at the gate apologising to increasingly confused neighbours.

The search itself became something of a spectacle. Mrs. Kowalczyk from number nine contributed a torch and a great deal of unsolicited advice about hedgehog behaviour gleaned entirely from a wildlife documentary she'd watched the previous winter; the postman, arriving mid-search to deliver the day's actual mail, took one look at the scene and, with admirable professionalism, simply joined the search himself rather than ask any questions. Jess, who had sworn she wanted nothing further to do with the animal, was nonetheless the one who eventually spotted him, crouching under the rhododendron with the quiet

triumph of someone whose earlier scepticism had, in the end, made her the most observant searcher of the lot.

Postman was eventually located under a rhododendron three doors down, entirely unbothered by the chaos he had caused, and the incident might have ended there had Kwame's teacher, Ms. Farrow, not been so struck by the children's genuine excitement that she asked whether the class could return, properly organised this time, to learn about hedgehog conservation. Oliver and Kwame spent the following week building what they grandly termed "Postman's Official Habitat," a project that involved considerably more cardboard, glue, and disagreement about architectural vision than either had anticipated, Kwame favouring an ambitious multi-storey design that Oliver quietly scaled back once it became clear neither of them could actually build a working staircase for a hedgehog.

By the time the class returned, properly supervised and considerably calmer, Postman had a proper hedgehog house at the bottom of the garden, a laminated information sheet Jess had grudgingly helped design despite her earlier scepticism, and something like local celebrity status. Ms. Farrow's class raised enough money, through a sponsored walk that Kwame organised with alarming efficiency for a ten-year-old, to buy hedgehog houses for three other gardens on the street, each one installed with a small ceremony that the neighbours, somewhat to their own surprise, genuinely seemed to enjoy attending.

Ms. Farrow's class, meanwhile, had grown so attached to the

project that several parents reported their children requesting hedgehog-related books for their birthdays that year, and one particularly enterprising pair of classmates started a small, entirely unofficial newsletter called The Hedgehog Herald, which ran, in total, for four issues before enthusiasm inevitably shifted to a different animal entirely, though Oliver kept every copy in a folder under his bed regardless.

Kwame, for his part, never quite lost his fascination with the whole episode, and spent much of the following summer cycling over specifically to check on Postman's habitat, occasionally bringing along younger cousins for what he grandly called "educational visits," during which he would recite hedgehog facts with a confidence that rather outpaced his actual expertise, most of it drawn, transparently, from a single library book he had renewed four times without ever quite finishing.

Oliver's mother, who had spent the whole saga alternating between mild exasperation and quiet pride, eventually admitted to Oliver that the post box had never once, in fifteen years at that address, generated so much as a single interesting conversation with the neighbours until a hedgehog moved in uninvited, and that she had, on balance, decided this made the whole chaotic fortnight entirely worth it.

Postman, for his part, remained magnificently indifferent to his own fame, and disappeared, as hedgehogs do, sometime in November to hibernate somewhere Oliver never quite located. Jess maintained, all winter, that she had no particular interest in

his whereabouts, a claim rather undermined by how often she found reasons to check the garden. He reappeared the following March, considerably thinner, in exactly the same post box, as if to confirm that whatever adventure he'd caused, he had at least chosen his shelter deliberately, and Jess, for once, said nothing at all about disaster, only smiled.

Discussion Questions

- 1. How does a small, accidental event lead to a larger positive outcome in this story?*
- 2. What role does Jess's scepticism play in the story, and how does her attitude change?*

7. Two Rivals and One Umbrella

Friendship / Humour

For most of the autumn term, Yusuf and Callum had maintained a rivalry so committed, so thoroughly researched, and so entirely lacking in any actual cause, that their form tutor had taken to referring to them, not entirely fondly, as "the ongoing situation." It had begun, as far as anyone could reconstruct, over a debate-club final the previous spring, which Yusuf had won by a margin so narrow that Callum had never quite recovered his dignity, and it had metastasised since into competition over essentially everything: grades, the school's five-a-side football league, and, memorably, an entirely fabricated dispute about whose turn it was to feed the class hamster.

Neither of them could have explained, if pressed, why the rivalry mattered so much, except that it had become a kind of scaffolding around which their identities at school had quietly been built. Yusuf was "the one who beats Callum." Callum was "the one who's going to beat Yusuf eventually." Their classmates, for their part, found the whole thing endlessly entertaining, occasionally egging it on with the mischievous enthusiasm of people who enjoy drama they have no personal stake in, comparing test scores between the two of them out loud and placing entirely unofficial bets on the outcome of the five-a-side league.

Neither role left much room for anything as inconvenient as actually liking each other, which is presumably why it took a sudden, violent downpour on a Tuesday in November, and a single shared umbrella, to finally dismantle the whole arrangement. It happened outside the school gates, where both boys, having missed their buses through entirely unrelated misfortunes, found themselves standing under the same narrow awning as the rain turned from drizzle to genuine assault. Yusuf had an umbrella. Callum did not.

There followed several minutes of extremely stiff silence, each waiting for the other to either ask for shelter or walk off pointedly into the rain rather than accept help from a rival, until the absurdity of the standoff apparently struck them both at once, and Yusuf, without quite looking at Callum, simply held the umbrella slightly further over than strictly necessary. Callum, for his part, made a small, grudging noise that might, in more generous circumstances, have been mistaken for gratitude, and the two of them set off down the road at exactly the same pace, neither willing to be the one who walked either faster or slower.

The walk home took twenty-five minutes, most of a school bus route, during which they discussed, with the strained politeness of diplomats at a difficult summit, the weather, a maths test neither had studied for, and eventually, almost accidentally, the actual debate final from the previous spring. Callum admitted he still thought his closing argument had been stronger. Yusuf admitted, somewhat to his own surprise, that

he'd thought so too, and had simply had better luck with the judges' particular interests that day. "You had Mrs. Pallister," Yusuf said. "She always liked a strong opening more than a strong finish." Callum considered this for several seconds, visibly relieved to have, at last, an explanation that didn't require him to accept he'd simply lost.

It was not a dramatic reconciliation. Nobody apologised for anything specific, because there was nothing specific to apologise for, only a year's accumulated momentum that had somehow acquired the weight of an actual grievance. But something had shifted by the time they reached Callum's street, where Callum, rather than simply saying goodbye, found himself inviting Yusuf in out of the rain for ten minutes while it eased off, an invitation that would have been unthinkable a fortnight earlier and that both of them seemed faintly startled to have arrived at.

The following week, when the form tutor braced herself for the usual bickering over hamster duty, she found instead that the two of them had already worked out a schedule between themselves, without consulting her at all, and seemed faintly amused by her surprise. Their classmates, robbed of their usual entertainment, briefly attempted to reignite the rivalry by loudly comparing a recent test result in front of them both, only to watch, with visible disappointment, as Yusuf and Callum exchanged a look of shared, weary tolerance and changed the subject entirely.

By the spring, the two of them had taken to walking to the

bus stop together most mornings regardless of weather, a habit that would have been entirely unremarkable between any other pair of classmates but which their form tutor, watching from the staff room window one particularly ordinary Tuesday, found so quietly satisfying that she mentioned it, unprompted, at the next staff meeting, as an example of the sort of thing that made the job worthwhile even on difficult weeks.

They did eventually enter the five-a-side league together rather than against each other, forming, by unanimous vote of their teammates, an entirely unstoppable defensive partnership that opposing strikers came to dread specifically, a development neither of them had predicted and both privately found far more satisfying than any of their old individual rivalries had ever managed to be.

Their form tutor, reflecting on the whole affair rather more than she probably needed to, later remarked to a colleague that she'd learned something from watching it unfold: that two people can maintain an elaborate performance of dislike for months without either one actually believing it any more, simply because nobody has yet handed them a good enough reason to stop, and that sometimes all it takes is a shared umbrella and twenty-five minutes of unavoidable proximity to do what a dozen well-meant staffroom interventions never could.

The rivalry never entirely vanished — some habits are too comfortable to abandon completely — but it became, from that wet Tuesday onward, something closer to a running joke

between friends than an actual conflict. Callum still brings up the debate final occasionally. Yusuf still refuses to concede the point. Neither of them minds any more, and these days, when it rains, one of them simply brings the umbrella for both.

Discussion Questions

- 1. What does the story suggest about how rivalries can sometimes be more about identity than about the actual disagreement?*
- 2. Why do you think the shared umbrella, specifically, was the turning point rather than a bigger event?*

8. The Dog Who Judged Talent Shows

Animals / Humour

Every year, Ashcombe Primary held a talent show in the last week of term, and every year, for reasons lost to institutional memory, the judging panel included the headteacher, the deputy headteacher, and Colonel, an elderly bulldog belonging to the caretaker, Mr. Pettigrew, who had apparently been brought in as a judge eight years earlier as a one-off joke that nobody had ever had the heart, or the authority, to discontinue.

Colonel's judging method consisted entirely of remaining asleep through most performances and occasionally, unpredictably, lifting his head to give a single, deep, mournful bark, an action the school had long ago decided to interpret as a mark of particular distinction, since it happened so rarely that whichever act triggered it invariably felt as though they had achieved something significant. This year, the mystery of what precisely stirred Colonel from his slumber became a matter of intense twelve-year-old speculation, since he had, thus far in rehearsals, barked exactly once, during a magic act involving a slightly incompetent card trick, and remained resolutely silent through everything else.

Theories multiplied rapidly across the school, most of them entirely unscientific. One popular rumour held that Colonel could only be moved by performances involving the colour red,

a theory swiftly disproven when a girl in a scarlet dress recited a poem to complete silence. Another suggested he simply favoured whichever act rehearsed nearest to his usual napping spot by the radiator, a theory that collapsed the moment the magic act, performed nowhere near the radiator, produced its single celebrated bark regardless.

Priyanka, who had spent three months perfecting a violin piece she was quietly terrified of performing in front of the whole school, became fixated on the idea that securing Colonel's bark would somehow validate months of nervous practice in a way that the human judges' polite applause never quite would. Her best friend Deshawn, who was performing immediately after her with a stand-up comedy routine he'd been rehearsing obsessively in the mirror, agreed to help her "crack the Colonel code," as he put it, with the seriousness of someone conducting actual scientific research, complete with a notebook in which he recorded, with genuine solemnity, the precise timing of every rehearsal noise that produced so much as a twitch of Colonel's ear.

Their investigation, involving several afternoons spent quietly observing Colonel during other rehearsals, eventually produced a theory: Colonel did not respond to skill, volume, or technical accomplishment at all. He responded, as far as they could determine, exclusively to anything involving a sudden change in rhythm — the moment in the magic act when the cards were suddenly, dramatically fanned out; a drummer's abrupt cymbal crash during practice; anything with a surprising pause followed

by a burst of sound. Mr. Pettigrew, passing through the hall during one of these observation sessions, watched the two of them scribbling notes with unmistakable amusement but offered, when asked directly, only a noncommittal shrug and a comment about how "Colonel's always had strong opinions about music, he just doesn't share them with everyone."

On the night itself, Priyanka, against every instinct of a classically trained violinist, built a single unplanned pause into the middle of her piece, a moment of near-silence before the final, triumphant passage, a change her violin teacher would almost certainly have disapproved of had she known about it in advance. Colonel, apparently unable to help himself, lifted his head and delivered his solitary bark precisely as she resumed playing, and the hall, already moved by the performance, erupted into a laughter and applause that had as much to do with the dog's impeccable timing as with the music itself. Priyanka, mid-bow, had to bite back a grin fierce enough to nearly ruin her final note.

Deshawn's set, immediately after, deliberately built around a long comic pause before its final line, earned Colonel's second bark of the evening — a first in the show's eight-year history — and the two of them spent the after-party comparing notes with the smug satisfaction of scientists whose hypothesis had been thoroughly confirmed, sketching out increasingly ambitious plans for next year's acts entirely around the goal of extracting a third, unprecedented bark.

Word of their discovery spread quickly through the school,

and the following year's contestants arrived considerably more theatrically prepared, several of them building deliberate pauses into acts that had never previously needed one, to Colonel's evident, if entirely indiscriminating, delight. The headteacher, addressing the matter at a staff meeting with what she insisted was complete seriousness, noted that student engagement with the concept of comedic and musical timing had "measurably improved" since the discovery, a claim nobody could substantiate but which everybody enjoyed repeating regardless.

Priyanka, for her part, kept practising the violin long after that summer, and credits the whole episode, half-jokingly, with teaching her more about performance than two years of formal lessons had managed: that the moments you hold back are sometimes exactly what make the moments you don't land properly, whether your audience happens to be a packed school hall or one elderly, thoroughly unbothered bulldog.

The headteacher, only half-joking, suggested at the following year's show that Colonel be given an official title befitting his apparently sophisticated grasp of comic and musical structure, and the programme that year duly listed him, in print, as "Colonel: Judge of Timing and Dramatic Pause," a credit he received, as ever, entirely asleep, one paw twitching very slightly as the audience read it aloud to each other with delighted disbelief.

Mr. Pettigrew, overhearing them, merely smiled and said that Colonel had always been a more discerning judge than anyone

gave him credit for, and refused, despite considerable pressure from both of them over the following weeks, to confirm or deny whether he'd known the secret all along. Priyanka suspected, from the particular quality of his smile, that he had known for years, and had simply been waiting, with the patience of a man who trusted good detective work to find its own way there eventually, for someone curious enough to work it out for themselves.

Discussion Questions

- 1. Why might Priyanka feel that Colonel's approval matters more to her than the human judges' applause?*
- 2. What does the story imply about the value of paying close attention and testing ideas, even about something silly?*

9. My Neighbour, the Amateur Beekeeper

Humour / Friendship

Mr. Ferreira had lived next door to us for as long as I could remember, a quiet, courteous man who kept an immaculate lawn and, until the spring I turned fourteen, had never given anyone the slightest reason to suspect he harboured ambitions of any kind. This changed abruptly the day three wooden hives appeared at the bottom of his garden, accompanied by a suit that made him look, my mother observed, "like an astronaut who'd taken a catastrophically wrong turn."

As the only teenager on the street with what my mother generously called "an excess of free time," I was recruited, somewhat against my will, as Mr. Ferreira's unofficial assistant, a role that mostly involved holding things, standing at what he assured me was a safe distance, and occasionally being sent to fetch his reading glasses, which he lost with a regularity that seemed almost supernatural given how few places there were to lose them in a single garden.

My initial scepticism about the entire enterprise — bees seemed to me, at fourteen, an unnecessary risk undertaken by a man who had previously seemed entirely sensible — lasted approximately until the first time he opened a hive and

showed me the comb inside, glistening and impossibly intricate, thousands of bees moving with a coordination that looked less like chaos and more like the most complicated dance I had ever seen. Mr. Ferreira talked to them constantly, in a low, conversational murmur that he swore calmed them, though I privately suspected it did rather more to calm him.

He explained, that first afternoon, that his own grandfather had kept hives back in Portugal, and that he'd spent forty years telling himself he'd take it up again "once things settled down," a phrase that had apparently covered several decades of career, family, and a house move before he finally admitted things were never going to settle down any more than they already had, and that if he wanted to keep bees, he would simply have to begin. I remember thinking, at fourteen, that this was a faintly ridiculous way to run a life. I think about it rather differently now.

The first harvest, that August, produced barely two jars of honey, most of which Mr. Ferreira insisted on giving away to neighbours who had, in his words, "tolerated the inconvenience" of living near his experiment, an inconvenience that had amounted, as far as I could tell, to absolutely nothing beyond one memorable afternoon when a swarm relocated briefly to Mrs. Kowalczyk's washing line and had to be gently persuaded elsewhere by a local beekeeping association member summoned in some urgency, while Mrs. Kowalczyk herself stood at a safe distance narrating events to anyone who would listen with the breathless drama of a war correspondent.

The second summer brought a genuine scare, when an entire hive collapsed over a single fortnight for reasons neither Mr. Ferreira nor the beekeeping association could satisfactorily explain. I had never seen him so quiet. He spent an entire Sunday simply sitting on an upturned crate beside the empty hive, not doing anything in particular, and when I asked if he was alright, he said only that losing a hive felt oddly like losing an argument you didn't know you were having, and that the only remedy he'd ever found was to start the next one properly rather than dwell on where the last one had gone wrong.

By the third summer, the two jars had become nearly thirty, and Mr. Ferreira had developed, to his own evident bewilderment, something of a local reputation, fielding questions at the school fete from parents curious about starting hives of their own and giving, with visible pride, an entirely unplanned talk to my biology class about pollination that ran forty minutes over its allotted time and which several classmates later cited as the reason they'd chosen ecology topics for their coursework. He credited me, quite undeservedly, with having "kept the whole operation honest" simply by turning up every week whether I felt like it or not, a compliment I have thought about more often than he probably realises.

My own family, in the meantime, had become unofficial and enthusiastic beneficiaries of the whole enterprise, my mother eventually converting an embarrassing quantity of Mr. Ferreira's honey into jars of honey cake she insisted on distributing to half

the street, and my father, initially the most sceptical of all of us about the wisdom of an elderly man taking up beekeeping alone, becoming, by the third summer, the proud unofficial keeper of the spare suit, which he wore on the rare occasions Mr. Ferreira needed a second pair of steady hands.

When I left for university myself, Mr. Ferreira gave me, without any particular ceremony, a small jar from that year's harvest and a folded photocopy of a beekeeping guide he'd annotated in the margins over the years, telling me only that I probably wouldn't need it any time soon, but that it was the sort of thing worth having around for whenever the moment eventually arrived. I still have it, unopened in any practical sense, on a shelf in my student flat, and I think about it more often than its size would suggest.

Mr. Ferreira still emails me, most Augusts, with a single line reporting that year's harvest — sometimes proud, sometimes apologetic, once memorably just the words "a difficult year for everyone, bees included" — and I have come to look forward to that message more than almost any other piece of news I receive, a small yearly proof that somewhere, a patient man is still quietly showing up beside three wooden boxes at the bottom of his garden.

I never did develop Mr. Ferreira's calm around an open hive, and I suspect I never entirely lost the instinct to flinch when one of his bees drifted too close. But I learned, over those three summers, something about patience that no classroom had

managed to teach me, watching a man tend something slow and easily disrupted with a gentleness that had nothing to do with results and everything to do with simply, steadily, showing up, hive after hive, season after season, whether or not that particular year rewarded him with anything more than the showing up itself.

Discussion Questions

- 1. What does the narrator's changing attitude towards beekeeping tell us about first impressions?*
- 2. Identify a moment in the text where humour and a serious point are combined. Explain the effect.*

10. The Day the Ducks Took Over the School

Animals / Humour

It began, as these things generally do, with a single unlocked gate. The pond at the bottom of Kingsley Academy's playing field had, for years, hosted a small and entirely unremarkable population of mallards, who kept largely to themselves and were, by unspoken agreement, ignored by staff and students alike. This arrangement collapsed spectacularly one Wednesday in May when a maintenance worker, repairing a fence panel, left the gate to the field propped open during his lunch break, at precisely the moment the school's Year 7 cohort was released for morning break.

What followed has since become the stuff of Kingsley legend, recounted with increasing embellishment at every subsequent parents' evening. Twenty-three ducks, apparently sensing an opportunity that eleven years of pond-based existence had never previously offered, made a determined and remarkably organised advance across the playing field, through the propped gate, and into the main school building via a set of doors that a Year 8 student named Priti had, with spectacularly poor timing, chosen that exact moment to prop open with a fire extinguisher while waiting for a friend.

Priti would later insist, to anyone who would listen, that she had propped the door open for a maximum of ninety seconds, and that the ducks' timing amounted to nothing short of a conspiracy against her personally. Nobody believed this theory, exactly, but it was repeated so often and with such conviction that by the end of term several younger students had genuinely come to believe the ducks had been planning the whole thing for weeks.

The ducks distributed themselves throughout the ground floor with what several teachers later described, with grudging admiration, as tactical precision. Four took up residence in the school hall, disrupting a Year 9 assembly on the importance of punctuality with an irony that was not lost on anyone present, least of all the deputy head delivering it, who paused mid-sentence, looked at the ducks now waddling unhurriedly across the stage, and simply sat down in the front row to wait the situation out rather than attempt to continue over the commotion. Several more discovered the canteen, where a lunch lady named Mrs. Osei, displaying a composure that would later earn her a special mention in the headteacher's end-of-term assembly, calmly continued serving fish fingers to a queue of students while stepping over ducks with the unbothered efficiency of someone who had, evidently, seen stranger things.

The most celebrated incident, however, involved a single duck who made its way, via a route nobody has ever satisfactorily reconstructed, into the staff room during Mr. Halloran's free

period, where it settled itself, with an air of complete entitlement, directly on top of a stack of Year 10 mock exam papers Mr. Halloran had been marking. Mr. Halloran, a physics teacher renowned among students for being almost impossible to fluster, reportedly regarded the duck for a long moment before remarking, to the empty staff room, "Well, at least someone's finally taking an interest in these," and continuing to mark around it for a further twenty minutes rather than disturb it, occasionally reading out particularly weak answers aloud to the duck as if seeking a second opinion.

Order was eventually restored by the caretaker, Mr. Adeyemi, and a rapidly assembled team of student volunteers — led, somewhat improbably, by Priti, determined to atone for her role in the gate incident — who spent a chaotic but genuinely joyful forty minutes herding ducks back towards the pond using floor mats as makeshift shields and a great deal of shouted, contradictory advice. Two students very nearly came to blows over whether ducks responded better to gentle coaxing or brisk confidence, a scientific disagreement that was never conclusively resolved, since both approaches seemed to work about half the time and fail spectacularly the other half.

By the time the last duck had been persuaded back through the gate, the entire school, staff included, had gathered at the windows to watch, and a ragged cheer went up as Mr. Adeyemi finally secured the latch, holding both arms aloft like a man who had just won something considerably more significant than

a duck-herding operation, to which Priti responded, without a trace of remorse, by taking a deep bow.

Mr. Halloran, asked repeatedly over the following weeks to recount the story of the duck and the mock exams, refined his telling each time with the practised timing of a man who had realised, somewhat to his own surprise, that he now possessed the single most popular anecdote in the entire physics department, and he made a point, for years afterward, of displaying that particular stack of marked papers on his desk each May as a kind of unofficial anniversary tribute.

Priti, meanwhile, leaned so thoroughly into her reputation as the accidental architect of Duck Day, as it came to be known, that she was voted, entirely without irony, "Most Likely to Cause a Minor Environmental Incident" in the Year 8 yearbook the following summer, an honour she accepted at the awards assembly with a bow nearly as theatrical as the one she'd given after the last duck was finally recaptured.

The maintenance worker responsible for the fateful propped gate, mortified beyond measure, spent the following term volunteering an hour of his lunch break every Friday to help the school's small wildlife club build proper nesting boxes around the pond, a gesture the headteacher publicly thanked him for at the end-of-year assembly, remarking, drily, that Kingsley Academy had perhaps never had a maintenance incident with quite such a constructive afterlife.

The school's newsletter that week ran the headline

"KINGSLEY ACADEMY: A LEARNING ENVIRONMENT FOR ALL SPECIES," and the pond gate has, since that day, been fitted with a lock requiring two separate keys, kept by two separate members of staff who are required to coordinate before opening it — a level of institutional caution that students agree is almost certainly an overreaction, and that most secretly hope will, one day, fail again.

Discussion Questions

- 1. How does the story use exaggeration and understatement together to create humour?*
- 2. Which character's reaction to the chaos did you find most amusing, and why?*

11. The Squirrel Who Stole My Homework

Humour / Animals

For approximately four hundred years, or so it must have felt to every teacher who ever heard it, "the dog ate my homework" has stood as the universal, transparently false excuse of students everywhere. Marcus Webb would like it known, for the historical record, that in his particular case, the excuse was not only true but considerably stranger than the original cliché, since no dog was involved at any point, and the actual culprit was a red squirrel he later came to know, with grudging respect, as Sir Reginald.

It began on a Sunday evening in October, when Marcus left his half-finished geography project — a large, carefully labelled diagram of river erosion, several hours of work already invested — on the garden table while he went inside for dinner, fully intending to finish it within the hour. When he returned, the diagram was gone, and a suspiciously purposeful squirrel was disappearing over the fence with a corner of paper still visible between his teeth.

Marcus's first instinct was blind panic, followed swiftly by a second, more practical thought: nobody was ever going to believe this. His best friend Yusra, informed of events over a hastily typed message, replied with a single word — "Evidence" —

and appeared at his back door twenty minutes later with her older brother's binoculars and a look of grim determination that Marcus found, at the time, entirely disproportionate to the crisis at hand.

What followed was three days of what Yusra insisted on calling "a stakeout," involving considerable time spent crouched behind the garden shed, a notebook recording Sir Reginald's movements with the seriousness of a wildlife biologist, and one memorable false alarm when a completely different, entirely innocent squirrel wandered into view and was nearly accused on grounds of general suspicious behaviour. On the second afternoon, they finally tracked their quarry to a large oak two gardens over, where a nest, visible through Yusra's binoculars, appeared to be liberally reinforced with what looked unmistakably like shredded exercise paper.

Retrieving the actual homework was, naturally, out of the question — nobody was climbing an oak tree to negotiate with a squirrel over structural nesting materials — so Yusra proposed an alternative plan: they would photograph the nest, zoom in as best the binoculars and Marcus's ageing phone camera allowed, and present the resulting blurry but undeniable image to Mr. Aldous, the geography teacher, as supporting testimony. Mr. Aldous, a man not easily moved by dramatic excuses in twenty-two years of teaching, examined the photograph for a long moment, examined Marcus for an equally long moment, and finally said, "This is either the most elaborate excuse I've ever been given, or the most

unlucky. I'm inclined, against my better judgement, to believe the latter."

Word of the incident spread through the school with predictable speed, and by Wednesday, Marcus had acquired a small but persistent reputation as "the squirrel kid," a title he initially found mortifying and eventually, somewhat to his own surprise, began to enjoy, particularly once several classmates started bringing him increasingly implausible theories about Sir Reginald's supposed grudge against the geography department specifically. Yusra, delighted by her own detective work, produced a hand-drawn "wanted poster" featuring Sir Reginald's likeness, which she pinned, with Mr. Aldous's amused permission, to the classroom noticeboard for the remainder of term.

Mr. Aldous, for his part, allowed Marcus an extension without penalty, on the entirely reasonable condition that the new diagram be left somewhere "squirrel-proof," a stipulation Marcus took so seriously that he completed the replacement project at the kitchen table under his mother's direct supervision, refusing to let it out of his sight for even a moment until it was safely inside his school bag.

Sir Reginald, blissfully unaware of the reputation he had built for himself, continued his residence in the oak tree for the rest of the autumn, and Marcus, rather than holding a grudge, found himself leaving the occasional peanut on the garden table, a gesture Yusra declared "reckless provocation" and Marcus

privately thought of as something closer to a peace offering, or possibly hazard pay for the least believable homework excuse of his academic career.

Mr. Aldous, whose reputation for scepticism Marcus had assumed was permanent and unshakeable, later admitted at a staff meeting — a detail relayed to Marcus by a friend whose older sibling worked as a teaching assistant — that he had actually gone home that evening and looked up whether squirrels really did use paper as nesting material, partly out of professional curiosity and partly, he confessed, because he'd wanted a good excuse to tell the story at dinner. The confirmation that they genuinely do seemed to delight him rather more than the actual homework submission ever had.

Yusra's binoculars, borrowed rather more permanently than her brother had originally sanctioned, became something of a running fixture in their friendship afterward, deployed at the slightest provocation for any dispute either of them felt required visual verification, from settling arguments about which house on their street had the tallest hedge to, on one memorable occasion, confirming a rumour about a new ice cream van's exact opening hours.

The story even reached, in garbled form, a couple of younger siblings at the local primary school, one of whom reportedly attempted the same excuse on his own teacher a few months later without any supporting evidence whatsoever, an audacious gambit that Yusra heard about secondhand and found so

delightful she insisted on buying the boy a celebratory ice cream, on the grounds that ambition, even unearned, deserved some recognition.

By the time the geography project was finally marked — a solid B-plus, with a note in the margin reading only "resilient work, in more ways than one" — Marcus and Yusra had turned the whole saga into a running joke that outlasted the term itself, and Marcus still keeps the blurry nest photograph on his phone, less as evidence for any future teacher than as a reminder that the most unbelievable excuses are occasionally, gloriously, completely true.

Discussion Questions

- 1. Why do you think Mr. Aldous eventually believed Marcus's unusual excuse?*
- 2. What does Yusra's reaction to the crisis show about the kind of friend she is?*

12. A Very Reluctant Best Man

Friendship / Humour

When Theo's older cousin Marek announced his engagement, he made two decisions in quick succession that would define the following six months of Theo's life: first, that the wedding would include his elderly and famously disobedient sheepdog, Biscuit, as ring bearer, and second, that seventeen-year-old Theo, rather than any of Marek's actual adult friends, would be entrusted with the sacred and terrifying responsibility of managing the dog throughout the ceremony.

Theo's best friend Ola found this arrangement immediately and enormously funny, a reaction that did not improve when Marek, apparently unable to distinguish between a joking suggestion and an actual plan, insisted that Ola be recruited too, as what he called "backup ring security," a title that sounded considerably more official than the reality, which mostly involved standing near a dog who regarded formal occasions with the same enthusiasm most dogs reserve for baths.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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