

# The Child's Elephant



'Scary, funny,  
heartwarming'

*Michael  
Morpurgo*



Rachel Campbell-Johnston

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## About the Book

*'Throw your heart out in front of you and run to catch it.'*  
*That's what the boy's grandmother always said.*

When a baby elephant is left orphaned on the African savannah, Bat, a young herdsboy, takes her home and cares for her. But Bat's grandmother knows that Meya cannot stay with them for ever – the call of the wild will always be sounding in her soul.

And there are rumours born on the wind; frightening stories of kidnapping and suffering and war. Bat and his closest friend, Muka, are catapulted into a new life of unimaginable terror. Now memories of their village world feel so far away. Will the bond between elephant and child remain strong enough to save them?

A thrilling new novel which tells a heartbreakingly life-like tale.



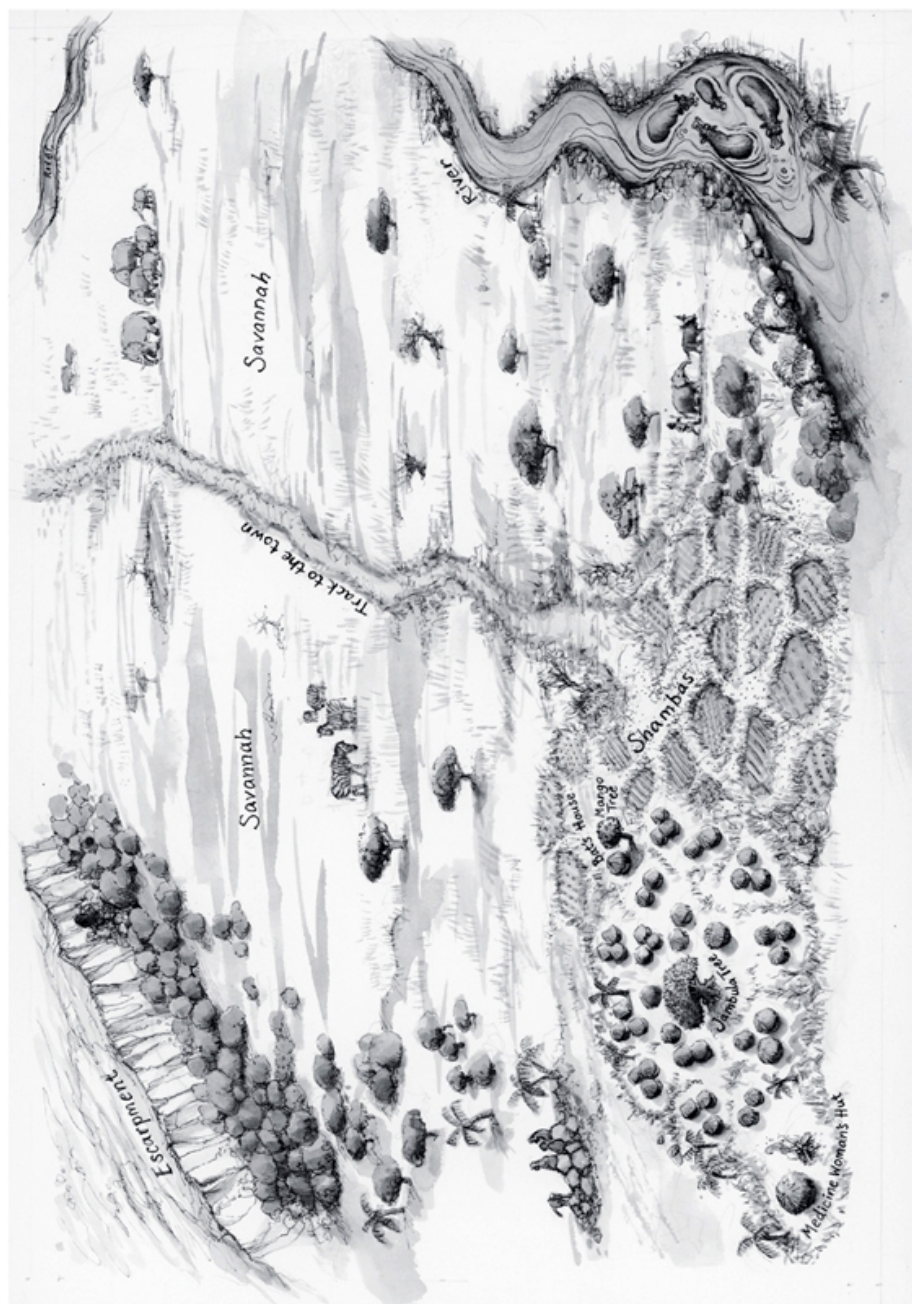
# THE CHILD'S ELEPHANT



**Rachel Campbell-Johnston**

**RHCP DIGITAL**

*For Katya, and in memory of Bob Foulerton*







# PART ONE



## CHAPTER ONE

The sound of the rifle shot rang through the air. For a few moments it seemed as if the whole world had stopped. The cicadas fell silent, a bush rat dived for its burrow, the cattle paused in their chewing and looked upwards with wide empty stares; and Bat, the lone herd-boy who up till then had been dreaming, swishing at bushes with a long whippy branch, let the switch fall and dropped suddenly down on his haunches. His head was quite hidden by the tall, yellow grass.

He felt the slow, rolling shudder through the soles of his feet. It rumbled his bones like the beat of the big tribal drum. Something that mattered had just happened out there on the savannah. He could feel it: something momentous that he didn't want to know about and yet knew at the same time he would have to find out. But not now, he thought, as he ducked even lower in the grasses. He let his breath leak through fingers clamped hard to his mouth. A lizard clung spellbound to a stalk right beside him. He gazed into the rapt gold-ringed bead of its eye. It stared back, unblinking, as if it had been stunned.

It seemed like for ever before the last fading echoes were finally quieted, before the waiting cicadas picked up their old song and the lizard, as if some bewitchment had suddenly been broken, darted off with a whisk of its skinny brown tail. In the shade of the thorn trees, the cattle returned to their grazing. They pulled at the grasses with long, curling tongues. But Bat, still as a sandgrouse that keeps low in its cover, hugged his arms round his knees and stayed down where he was.

He listened. Somewhere not so very far away he could hear people talking. The sound drifted like wood-smoke upon a slack wind: murmuring voices . . . then a clatter of

laughter . . . the silence that followed it . . . then a sudden angry shout . . . then nothing again . . . then the bark of an order. The air carried the fragments in faint tattered snippets. They sent flurries of nerves stirring across his bare flesh.

Who was it? He could feel his pulse racing. His heart jumped in his throat. Every shift of the breeze could have been someone approaching; every glint of the light could have been a stranger's glance. Was someone even now stealing up upon him? Unable to bear the uncertainty, he rose to his feet.

Nothing looked very different. The cattle were peaceable; a new calf was suckling; the scrublands that stretched all about him looked quite undisturbed. It was funny how hiding played tricks with your imagination. He shouldn't have allowed himself to get so scared, he thought. He was seven after all: far too old to be behaving like some panicky chicken.

Ducking his head low, Bat set off through the grasses. Their tall, feathered fronds brushed as high as his chest. His eyes darted warily as he slipped through the thorn bushes. When the branch of one snagged him he didn't cry out. He just paused for a moment and watched the blood trickling. It dried almost immediately in the afternoon heat.

After a while, he began to see traces; he started noticing places where the scrub had been squashed. Branches were broken and bushes were flattened. He slowed up his pace as he crested a ridge. The down-slope was stony. He would have to be careful not to trip. Flitting between boulders, half running, half scrambling, he arrived at a river-bed that had all but run dry. A basking snake slipped from a smooth sun-baked stone. Bat skirted the spot and it was then, in a patch of damp sand where the last buried moisture still lingered, that he spotted the footprint which brought him suddenly up short. It was huge! His heart thumped. It was truly gigantic, he thought, as big as the biggest circle that

he could have made if stretching out both arms as wide as he was able he had then brought them round and tried to brush fingertips.

Bat swallowed. He'd already come too far . . . far further than he'd first meant to . . . much further than anyone would have told him was safe. He cast a quick backwards glance. He could no longer see his cattle. The dry riverbed glittered and flashed in the heat. On the far bank was a thicket. Something had crashed straight through it. A bush was splattered with red. Perhaps it was a hibiscus, the boy found himself hoping; but he didn't need to look a second time to know that it was not: it was blood.

He scuttled for the cover of some rocks ahead. Beyond, he could now see a vast shadowy shape. From where he was crouching, it loomed high as a mountain. It blocked out the horizon. It blocked out, for a moment, all the thoughts in his head. But then, with a jolt, the full truth broke upon him. This mountainous form was a dead elephant.

Hands pressed to the rock face, Bat struggled to steady his breathing. His heart was racing so hard it was outrunning his head. Who? How? Why?

A figure emerged from beyond the great carcass. Bat swallowed the cry that almost burst from his lips. It was a man . . . a bare-chested man . . . with dark skin. . . so dark that it shone almost purple . . . and he was tall, Bat noticed, particularly tall . . . he must have stood as high as a stem of grown maize. And now he was moving. Bat could no longer see him. Was he coming closer? Dropping down even lower, the boy peeped through another gap.

There were two other people, both standing a little further off. A rifle was slung round the back of the nearest; the other was supporting what Bat realised with a shudder could only have been an elephant's tusk.

Poachers! These were poachers! The boy turned dizzy with fright.



He had to get away! But how? He glanced frantically about. The dark man was squatting. Bat scarcely dared breathe as he watched him. He was fiddling with something on the ground at his feet; but when he glanced up, eyes scanning the horizon, Bat saw for the first time the tribal scars that branded him. They ran straight across his brow: three lines like a frown cut deep into his forehead. Bat flinched from the menace embedded in that face.

Wiping his palms on a pair of dusty green trousers, the man half rose and, putting one booted foot forward, gave a sudden hard tug. A chainsaw snarled into life. For a second it snatched all the silence from the air. Then it sputtered and stopped. There was a moment of stunned hush. The man cursed. His cry rang round the stones of the dried riverbed.

Terrified, Bat tried to squeeze himself in even tighter underneath the boulder. He reached up for a handhold. A loose stone was dislodged. It rolled down the slope with a sudden loud clatter.

‘Stop! What’s that?’

‘What?’

‘That sound.’

‘Nothing.’

‘Yes, it was something. There’s someone there . . . someone watching.’

The speaker grabbed at the rifle slung over his shoulder. The man propping the elephant tusk jumped quickly aside. His load slipped from its shoulder and hit the ground with a thud. A swarm of flies rose in a cloud of black buzzing. They bumped about like the thoughts that dashed round in Bat’s head.

‘Leave it. It’s nothing.’ The command grated like metal.

But the man with the gun remained unconvinced. Raising his rifle, he began to move outwards. He was heading directly to where the boy was now crouching.

‘I heard someone.’

‘Who?’

‘Could be a ranger.’

‘What are the chances of a ranger being here?’

Bat’s heart thumped so wildly he was sure they would hear it. Through a chink in the rocks he saw a blood-spattered face. Every step brought it closer. He listened to the slow crunch of boots.

Should he run now, he wondered? Should he make a dash? He glanced at the riverbank down which he had stumbled. There was no way he would make it. He tried to pretend he was stone. A fly crawled over his lips. He didn’t so much as twitch: if he did he was dead.

The footsteps came nearer. A shadow slipped past the rock. The man was so close, Bat could smell his sour sweat. Somewhere in the bush a francolin was singing. It’s clacketing call was so very familiar . . . and this would be the very last time that he ever heard it, the boy thought.

‘Who’s that?’

The man with the rifle swivelled. A vehicle was approaching. A sudden silence fell as the poachers all strained to see.

‘I told you we’d come too far!’ Bat heard one of them crying. ‘We’re too close to the village. Anyone could have seen us.’

‘No one has seen us.’ The tall one remained calm. ‘Look! It’s only the jeep.’

In the distance, a Land Rover was bouncing towards them, kicking up billowing clouds of red dust.

‘Still, I don’t like it here,’ one of the men was grumbling. ‘It’s time to get out!’

‘Get out?’ It was the driver of the still-running vehicle who was now shouting.

‘There was a noise!’ the man answered. ‘Anyone could be watching. They could be right over there behind one of those rocks.’ He nodded towards the boulders beyond which Bat was hiding.

The driver slid out of the jeep. He was wearing a pair of dark glasses. The boy couldn't tell where his eyes were looking. His gaze swept over the very spot in which Bat was now crouching. For one heart-pounding second, he thought it was going to stop. But then the man turned back. 'For God's sake! No one's going until the job's been done.'

The next thing Bat knew, two figures were scrambling onto the elephant's corpse. A third fetched the chainsaw. This time it ripped into life at first tug and, snarling, lunged forward, ferocious as a chained dog. Bat heard the long rising whine as it finally bit. Its blade spewed bloodied flecks. Surely they would leave soon, he prayed, as he clutched at the rock face. Surely they would go when they had the second tusk. The machine choked and stopped.

One of the men dropped, half climbing, half tumbling, down the slope of the animal and was lost from view. Bat heard him grunting as he shouldered the weight of the tusk. An argument broke out but Bat couldn't tell about what. Then the booty was loaded into the back of the jeep. It fell with a *thunk* that made the suspension rock. The chainsaw clattered in behind. Then the tailgate was slammed. The idling engine revved up. Bat could hear the gears grinding as the jeep ploughed off.

Little by little, the silence washed back in its wake. But it was only after the first of the rock hyraxes had begun to creep from their crevices that Bat felt that at last for him too it might be safe. He scanned the horizon for a glimpse of the Land Rover but it was by now out of view. Clouds of red dust were re-settling. The hyraxes grunted and then, seeing him rising, edged back bottom-first into their holes again.

The boy slipped through the boulders. There, right before him, loomed the dead animal. It rose like a mountain from a lake of purplish blood. Flies stumbled drunkenly about on its surface. They sunk into deep sticky pools and drowned. And for a long while Bat could do nothing but stand and

stare numbly. He felt as if his whole mind had been swept away by force. He gazed at the baobab, a vast solitary mourner.

Soon the vultures would come. The first pair had already settled. They were shuffling impatiently in its silvery branches and Bat could see several more circling greedily above. As soon as he had gone, they would glide down to feast.

A marabou stork paced to and fro at a distance, its pink gizzard swinging, its black shoulders hunched. The boy rushed at it angrily, flapping his arms. 'Shoo! Shoo!' he shouted. 'Get back! Go away!' It fluttered onto a fallen branch and rattled its bill. A jackal yipped in alarm and slunk a little further off.

Bat did not pursue it. What would have been the good? It was already too late. Taking one last slow look, he turned and set his step homewards. The sadness was so deep that it made his bones ache. Above him, in the depthless blue spaces of an African afternoon, he noticed an eagle. It inscribed its great circles upon the sky's emptiness.

'Only the eagles know everything in this country,' his grandmother had told him.

The bird gave a thin scream. It sounded more like a wail.



## CHAPTER TWO

The next morning, Bat drove his cattle out of the village to graze. By the time the sun was touching the tops of the acacias he was already well on his way: a small, lithe figure with a light, easy gait jumping through the undergrowth and leaping over branches, chivvying his cows outwards with whistles and high piping calls. In one hand he clutched his steel-bladed panga. He used it to cut the forage that he would later bring home. His other hand he kept free to flap and wave at the cattle or to hitch at the waistband of his pair of too-big brown shorts. A small sisal satchel with some lunch in was slung over one shoulder, along with a length of rope. A gourd to scoop water bumped against his hip. But, although he did own a pair of twisted hide sandals, his feet, as so often, were bare. He preferred it because he could run faster like that.

Sometimes, on his way along the paths that led out to the pastures, his cattle would stray onto somebody's crop. They would snatch greedy mouthfuls of maize leaves and uproot millet stalks. If the owner was there, they would yell out and scold them; but if they were not, Bat was likely to pinch something too: a small plump banana or perhaps a ripe avocado. He would eat it later once he was out of sight, his black eyes sparkling with pleasure through their fringe of thick lashes; a big gap-toothed smile brightening his small round face.

The cows moved ahead of him, their pace gradually slowing until he caught up with them when, with a burst of new energy, they trotted briskly on. They wove this way and that, their gaunt hipbones jutting, their long curving horns borne aloft like great crowns on their heads and, although now in the dry season their spines poked up like ridges, after the rains when the grasses swiped their

bellies, they would soon grow sleek and fat. Then their hides would shine like polished wood.

Bat had eight cows in his herd, eleven if you counted the trio of still suckling youngsters that jostled along, nudging at their mothers' flanks. But he wouldn't have told you that if you had enquired. When anyone asked him how many cattle he looked after, he would just smile and say: 'As many as I looked after yesterday'. And yet he knew each of the animals as well as if they were part of his own family: he knew their names and their characters, their habits and their moods, their strong points and their failings, their preferences and dislikes. He knew that Kayo was inquisitive and could easily get into trouble; that Leko was a daydreamer with a tendency to lag; that Toco always slouched, head low and back sagging, unlike Tara, her chestnut twin who stood upright and foursquare with her muzzle stretched out. He knew that the pale freckled Anecanec had a scar under her belly from the time when, as a heifer, she had met a bush pig; and when he found watercress, he would always call Bwaro because she, more than any of them, relished its damp bitterness; but he knew that black Mutu would also slip in beside her because, wherever the restless Bwaro chose idly to wander, Mutu would slide along like a shadow at her side.

But Bat's favourite cow was the silvery Kila with her deep curved horns and her dark violet eyes. They had been born on the same day and had grown up together. Bat couldn't remember a time when she had not been there by his side and often, down by the water, they would lean contentedly together, the boy's arm draped companionably across the cow's sun-warmed back, gazing dreamily outwards as if lost in some land of shared memory. The water that dripped from the cow's lifted muzzle would fall through the air in sparkling droplets of light.

The boy was proud of his herd. Cattle are like their owners, his grandmother always told him: thin, wretched



beasts had thin, wretched handlers; listless creatures belonged to those without direction to their lives; dishonest men owned the sort of sly animals that would steal from the cattle that stood right beside them; and ill-tempered cows would lash out because they themselves had been beaten by someone too ill-tempered to be trusted to bring them up. But Bat's animals were all good-natured and lively and strong. He had inherited his grandmother's eye, the villagers said; he had that inborn ability to detect hidden traits, to know when a calf would blossom into maturity, to tell whether a puny animal would eventually flourish and fatten or if it would only further sicken and fail. They would always back his judgement when they wanted to buy.

The cows trusted Bat too, and now, though all morning they had wanted to move on, to follow the course of the river like they usually did, they remained with him instead on the grasslands that lay nearer the village. Bat did not want to stray too far that day. He didn't want to risk running into the gang of men with guns again.

His grandmother had tried to reassure him. 'Poachers are terrible people,' she had said. 'They will betray their own tribesmen just for the money. They will kill anyone who crosses them rather than risk being caught. You were brave to try to face them; but you were stupid too,' she had scolded. 'If you ever come across them again, just run. Run as fast as you can and don't stop even to think. But there's no need to worry now. Those poachers will long since have left the savannah. They'll have gone to the city in search of a buyer of ivory and people like that don't belong to these parts.'

But still Bat was edgy. As he squatted in the shade of a spreading acacia, his eyes flicked about nervously, constantly watching. It was almost noon. The sun was rising to its sweltering heights and the cattle were dozing, heads lowered and tails swinging. Every now and then a breeze stirred through the branches, sending a shower of

golden flowers tumbling onto their backs. The cows blinked their long lashes and breathed out with great lazy blows. Not a care in the world troubled them. But still Bat couldn't rest.

He jumped to his feet the moment he spotted a far distant figure. It wasn't a villager, even though this was the way girls occasionally came to draw water, because the girls always travelled in chattering gaggles; you would hear the noise of their laughter wafting over the grasses long before you saw the tops of the water pots that they carried on their heads. With a single big leap and a short burst of scrabbling, Bat swung himself up into the boughs of the tree. He flattened himself against a branch. All his fears of the previous day were flooding back. His lips started fizzing. He bit them so hard that he tasted his own blood.

But it was only a girl who was coming after all. He recognized her from some way off by the bounce of her gait. The enormous clay water jar that she carried almost dwarfed her and yet still she stepped out as if crossing the first springy grass of the rains. It was Amuka, the solitary stranger who had only recently come to live in the village. Her mother was sick, he'd been told, and her father lived in the city, and as she had no one at home any more to look after her, she had been sent here instead to stay with an aunt. Bat had heard the woman moaning away to his grandmother. 'It's just another mouth to feed,' she had complained. 'As if I haven't got five already; and they're all eating like locusts. What would I be wanting another daughter for?'

That had been less than a moon ago, but Bat had seen the girl often enough about the village since. He had watched her bending over her hoe as she planted cassava, halving the longer stalks with a single slice of her knife, stamping with a heel as she pressed down the dry earth; but she had never returned his gaze. She had never called out a greeting like the other girls did. And the time she had

caught him staring as he had yawned his way through a village meeting, she had just stared straight back at him with her usual fierce scowl. That, he presumed, was how she had earned her name.

Everyone in Bat's tribe had two names: the one they were given at birth by their parents and the tribal nickname that they later earned. The second would be chosen because it described them, and it would often be the one by which they were from then on known. Hers was Amuka. It meant ferocious creature. At first, when he'd heard it, Bat had been surprised. She had looked so graceful. She was slim as a sesame pod and, while the rest of the village girls had their hair cropped short as his or else tugged up and knotted into tight little spikes, she had long shiny braids that swung to and fro as she walked. Her black eyes were fringed with long fluttering lashes that fell onto the cheekbones of an oval face. But when she looked up you would see their whites flashing and you would soon understand how she had come to be called what she was. If anyone crossed her she would fly into a fury. She was like a mongoose, the villagers laughed, slender and sinuous and sweet enough to look at, but as soon as you meddled, she would bristle and attack. Like a mongoose, they said, her claws were never retracted, and so Bat, who by nature preferred avoidance to encounter, had tended to stay clear of her. He didn't want to get scratched – and especially not by a girl.

But now he was curious. Why did Amuka prefer to fetch water alone? The other girls in the village always went in a group. And why did she come now when the sun was still hot? And to this spot when there was another pool much nearer? There must be some reason. Perhaps she had a secret that nobody else knew. From his treetop vantage point, the boy watched her. But though he noticed her pausing as she spotted the cattle, she didn't see him as he lay there spying down through the leaves.

For a while, Muka just stood gazing out over the river. Apart from a broad channel that looped down the middle, it was almost dry. She looked at the ducks as they dabbled in the mud at the edges, at the flamingos on the far bank as they dozed with necks bent. Then, stooping, she picked up a handful of pebbles and, one by one, skimmed them across the surface of a pool. Most of them disappeared in a few splashy plops; but a couple, Bat noticed with some admiration, hopped right across to land skittering on the far side. He wanted to scramble down, to see if he could throw better, but by the time he had decided that this was what he should do, she had sat down again – not like a girl with her legs stretched straight out in front of her, but squatting like a boy on her haunches, her hands cupping her chin. She was humming softly to herself. Was she missing her family? Bat wondered. The boy began to get bored. He was relieved when Muka eventually got back to her feet. Hauling her big clay pot down the banks of the river, she let it fill before hoisting it from the ground to her shoulder, and then from her shoulder onto her head. Adjusting it carefully, she began her slow homeward walk. Bat was disappointed. Was that all that was going to happen? If so, then it certainly hadn't been worth the wait. Plucking an acacia pod, he playfully hurled it. It landed right where he had meant it: right before her feet.

Amuka froze instantly, watchful as a mongoose when it first senses danger and, standing on its hind-legs, starts to utter its shrill growl. If she had been a mongoose, Bat thought, the neat little ears on either side of her skull would have pricked and her hair-braids would have bristled; and forgetting completely that she still hadn't seen him, he laughed out loud. The sound made the girl jump. Her water jar toppled. All its contents spilled. Bat scrambled down from his tree. He was going to apologize; he was going to make sure that her pot hadn't cracked; but

the girl didn't wait to find out what he intended. Springing at him in fury, she knocked him flat on his back.

Now Bat was enraged. He leaped to his feet in a rapid counter-assault. Arms flailing, eyes flashing, he lashed out, temper boiling. The girl was ready and seized him in a head-to-head lock. Shoulder to shoulder they tussled in a fierce riverbank scuffle, clawing and heaving and kicking and shoving until suddenly, pushed backwards and losing his footing, Bat found himself sliding. The situation was desperate, he realized, as he felt his grip slipping: he was about to lose to a girl in a fight. He made a last grab at Muka. It didn't stop him from falling; but at least he pulled her down too.

They landed with a splash in a stagnant pool. The water was filthy: slimy with bird-droppings and stinking of rotten fish. For a moment the pair of them sat there, completely stunned. Then Bat, wiping the gloop in a handful from his face, looked up and saw to his amazement that Muka was smiling. He flung the mud at her in impotent fury. She hurled a handful back. He retaliated. His aim had always been good. He could explode a ripe melon from twenty paces with his catapult. The shot landed smack in the middle of her forehead. But instead of howling as he had fully expected, she let out a peal of open-mouthed laughter. It poured from her like the new rains pouring over a rock. She reached for her own load of slopping ammunition and, even as she drew back her arm for the chuck, Bat could feel his own laughter starting to wriggle about inside him. It broke out in a great gap-toothed grin on his face.

A few moments later, they were both plastered head to toe in flung goo. Their shouts rang out around the rocks, sending the ducks bustling and unbalancing a fishing stork. Even a flock of flamingos came eventually to the conclusion that the time had at last come when it might be more prudent to take flight. They rose from the water in a

honking pink cloud. The children laughed all the louder and flapped their arms about.

They were completely exhausted by the time they had calmed down and started to try and clean themselves. The water poured from their skin in thickly muddied runnels. 'We'll smell like old fish for weeks now,' said Muka as she scrubbed. Bat giggled and nodded, but inside he was hoping that their friendship might last even longer. He still wanted to beat her at making stones walk on water.

'Are you hungry?' he asked when they had finally finished washing. He knew that she would be: even after the harvest her aunt's grain store was never more than half full. Muka nodded as she wrung out the folds of her wrap. In Bat's little satchel were two roasted maize cobs. 'Here! Take one of these,' he called, and soon they were sitting side by side, backs propped against a tree-trunk, silently eating their way through his lunch. Bat gnawed his from the side. One big front tooth had recently fallen out and, though the new one behind it was already emerging, the thin wavy edges pushing through the pink gum, it still had a long way to go. Muka nibbled in neat little lines down the cob. Curious, Kila came ambling over. She stared at the intruder and picked her nose with her tongue.

'My mother used to roast maize for me,' said Muka eventually, wiping her mouth and handing the husk to the cow.

Kila crunched at it meditatively. But Bat just sat puzzled. Why was that so remarkable? Surely everyone everywhere roasted maize cobs.

'I don't know where my mother is now,' Muka said. Her voice was so low it was barely more than a whisper and, half turning her head, she gazed at the cow as if it was the animal and not the boy whom she was now addressing. 'She was sick,' she murmured, 'and the villagers drove her away. "Why should we feed you," they said, "since you are going to die? You do not feed a ghost." So one day my

mother just got up and left. She told me she had to while she could still walk. She was going to look for my father, she said, and I couldn't go with her. She just handed me over like a bundle of washing to a neighbour. She asked her to take me to the home of my aunt. And that's what the woman did. I was handed over . . . again . . . and I've been here ever since.'

She paused for a moment. Bat wondered if she was crying. He stole a quick slantwise look but, although Muka's lips trembled, her eyes remained quite dry. 'Auntie thinks that my mother will come back and fetch me,' she whispered, 'but I don't suppose she ever will. I don't even think she's alive any more.'

'What about your father?'

Muka just shrugged. 'I don't know. I don't know him.'

A long silence hung between them. When Muka eventually turned she saw that it was Bat who was crying. The tears were spilling from the rims of his eyes, hanging in sparkles at the end of his lashes, rolling in big shiny drops down his cheeks. Seeing her looking, he hastily wiped them away.

'I don't know my father either,' he said and, stretching out a hand, he reached over for Kila, letting his fingers ripple down the loose folds of her neck.

'Do you know where he is?'

Bat shook his head. 'But I know that he's dead.' His mind darted back to the scene of yesterday's slaughter, to the great swollen carcass and the clambering people; to the clouds of black flies and the hacked-apart face. For a moment he thought he was going to retch. 'My father was killed by poachers,' he said. 'It was before I was born. He was a ranger, you see. He worked with elephants, and although he had often been warned of the danger, he still went out on the savannah, and it was there that he was shot. My grandmother says he died for the animals that he most loved.'

Bat gulped, trying to get rid of the lump that was rising in his throat. 'People told my grandmother she was lucky,' he said hoarsely. 'They said that my father had died a warrior's death; that it was better to be killed out in the bush, to lose your life hunting or fighting, than to die on your mat like a weak old man. But she didn't think she was lucky at all. "I know luck when I see it," she told me. "It's when a swarm of locusts flies over your crop without settling, or a delicious ripe mango drops straight into your lap. It's not when someone turns up at your home to tell you that you have just lost your only son." They never brought my father back. They couldn't find him; so he couldn't be buried outside his hut like he ought to have been. He had no family beside him to watch over his grave or throw sand on his body or plant a tree where he lay.'

'But didn't your grandmother do the ceremonies?' asked Muka. 'Didn't she say the prayers that bring the soul back?'

Bat nodded. 'She did. She performed all the ceremonies but her prayers were never answered. She never feels his spirit brushing by her in the hut. She never looks up and senses him just standing there watching. And now she says it's all over. He'll never return.'

'And your mother? Where's your mother?'

'She died too. It was only a few days after I was born. Her blood ran dry. That's what the villagers whisper; but my grandmother told me it was not her blood but her soul that could not drink. She missed her husband, my father, so much. Death is a scar that never heals: that's what my grandmother thinks.'

Bat's face brightened a little. 'It was my grandmother who brought me up . . . in the city at first. She worked for the white people with sky-coloured eyes.' He gave a slight smile. 'It was the white people who gave me my nickname, you know. My mother had called me Nakisisa. It means "born of the shadows". But the white people just started



calling me Bat. Bats are born of the shadows, they said. And somehow the name stuck.'

'Because it suits you,' Muka said. She had seen him out with his cattle, weaving through the dusk as he brought his cows in, zigzagging this way and that way across the open spaces, skimming the savannah like a bat skims the night.

The boy nodded. 'That's what my grandmother thinks. She says I suit a world as wide as the sky. That's why she stopped working in the city and brought me back here. I was still only tiny when she bundled me up in a cloth, knotted me round her shoulders and carried me home to our village.' Knuckling his fist, Bat leaned forward and rubbed fondly at Kila's broad brow. 'I was fed on the same milk as this cow,' he told Muka. 'She was born on the same day as me and so we shared her mother's milk.'

Kila shifted and kicked at a fly on her underbelly, then, stretching out her neck, she gave his arm a rough lick. She liked the taste of the salt; but it made both children laugh.

'I've got to go!' Muka jumped up suddenly. She hitched at the waistband of her crumpled blue wrap. 'I've already been too long and Auntie will be waiting.' She pulled a face. 'She'll be grumbling away by the time I get back.'

Bat clambered up too. Hastily they returned to the river, where Bat helped the girl fill her water jar and hoist it on to her head. Then he stood and watched her as she walked away, one crooked arm raised to support the balancing container, the other hanging loosely. Her hips swayed lightly from side to side.

'See you later,' Bat called when she was a short way off.

She half turned and, with her free hand, gave a shy little wave. 'I'll come back and find you,' she cried.

Bat smiled. He hoped that she would. He was still smiling to himself as he turned to check on his cattle. She had had a secret after all, he thought, and that was the secret of her real self.

