

Why elephants are red

It is most perfectly true that there is a person, just like you or I, whose job it is to paint the animals and the birds and the fish in the sea. I will not tell you this person's name, for that would give away a great secret which must especially not be given away.

A long time ago, when the animals were all sparkly and straight, this person was just a boy like you or I, all sparkly and straight (except, of course, that I am not as sparkly and straight as you). All the tigers and the elephants and giraffes and sheep walked about, gleaming grey, and in the air and the wind, all the kingfishers and blackbirds and parrots and pigeons flew about, burnished black; and in the seas and the rivers, all the whales and goldfish and eels and salmon swam and splashed about, sparkling silver. I was going to add that all the girls and boys and mummies and daddies walked about, all pink and with no clothes on - but I will certainly not tell you that, because it is rude.

Now this person, whose name we do not know, decided one day that the animals should be painted in different colours, to make the world a more interesting place. So he got out his paintbrush and his paints, put on a smock like his mummy told him, so that his tummy would not get all painty and smudged, and went out to look for the animals and the birds and the fish.

The first one he came across was the elephant, or the Efflant as she was known to all her friends, who was strolling in the woods, pointing her trunk at this and that and humming a short song.

'A most perfectly pleasant morning to you, young man,' said the elephant when she saw the boy in his smock. 'Where are you off to in the sunshine?' 'Good morning, madam,' said the boy, most polite in his manners, 'I am hoping to paint everyone different colours. Would you care to stand still awhile?'

Graciously, Efflant stood patiently in the shade of a potato-tree, such as grew plentiful in those straight and sparkly times, and chewed a few leaves while the boy painted her. He decided to paint her all red, except for the toenails and the trunk. The toenails he painted bright blue, like the sky, and for the trunk he chose the colour yellow. By the time he had finished painting her body, he had completely run out of the colour red, apart from a little scraping at the bottom of his box; which is why, my boy, you do not see many red animals. The trunk was very difficult, being soft and bendy in all the wrong places and crinkly and wrinkly at the bends, and it took the boy the best part of the most perfectly pleasant morning to finish the job. But at last he stood back, and admired his work.

'Well,' said Efflant with most obliging interest, 'How do I look?' The boy hummed and he hawed and he looked at her from a distance and from close up, and then he squinted and he blinked and then he walked away and whirled around to catch the colours unawares, and then he sighed; for, in truth and in all honesty, she looked worse than when he had started.

'I think, madam,' he said, putting away his painting-set like his mummy had shown him, 'That you should stroll very easily down to the river and take a bath and be all grey and sparkly once more.' So the elephant did just that, and eased herself into the river which flowed through the forest just there, and let the rushing water wash all the paint off. And downstream from there the red and the yellow paint mixed, and the goldfish who, until that very moment, had swum about sparkly and straight and silver in colour, because no one had thought to paint them, became orange, and admired themselves in their new finery. Meanwhile the elephant emerged dripping from the river, smiled a gracious smile at the painter-boy, and strolled back into the forest.

Disappointed, but not disheartened, the boy went in search of a new animal on which to paint some splendid colours. And he came across the tiger, creeping through the trees.

'A most perfectly pleasant morning to you, young man,' purred the tiger when he saw the boy in his smock. 'And where are you off to in the sunshine?'

'Good morning, sir,' said the boy, most polite in his manners, 'I am hoping to paint everyone different colours. Would you care to stand still awhile?'

Graciously, the tiger stood still on a brown pistachio-rock in a clearing such as were sprinkled plentiful in those straight and sparkly times, and let the boy open his paint-box. The boy dabbled his brush in the yellow and painted great dollops of paint across the broad and warm sparkly back of the grey tiger. But as he painted, he let his brush drop on the pistachio-rock, and soon streaks of brown were mingled with the yellow, and the tiger turned into a most stripy individual indeed. But no matter, my boy; the job was soon done, and before it was time for lunch, there stood the tiger, large and bouncy and fabulously stripy in appearance. The tiger, having examined himself very carefully in a pool of clear water, stroked his whiskers in secret delight and thanked the boy very kindly for his stripes, and melted away into the forest.

After lunch, and when his mummy let him, the boy went once more into the forest and whistled down the blackbird to give him some crumbs.

'A most perfectly pleasant afternoon to you, young man,' chirped the blackbird when he saw the boy in his smock. 'And where are you off to in the sunshine?'

'Good afternoon, sir,' said the boy, most polite in his manners, 'I am hoping to paint everyone different colours. Would you care to come and let me try a few of my paints on you?'

Graciously, the blackbird came down and perched close by. The boy took out his paints and turned the blackbird into the most wondrous and splendidly coloured bird that had ever flown. The legs became yellow, the wings a deep and exceptional blue, the chest red like an apple, the head a mask of green and white. What a magnificent bird we did see that afternoon, and one, alas my boy, we shall never see again. For the silly bird flew off into the air to show off his new colours to the world; and the paint was not at all dry. So that, as he flew and bounced through the air, the greens and the blues and the white spattered off into the air and fell upon the birds who stood and stared at this unlikely blackbird. And some birds were covered by the blue paint, and these were the kingfishers; and some were covered by green paint, and these were the parrots; and the white came off and covered the ducks and the geese. And the poor blackbird - well, the poor blackbird when he saw what had happened flew away into some bushes and hid, and of all the splendid and priceless colours only the yellow on his legs remained.

The boy sighed, for he felt that he would never make the world a more colourful place. Sadly, he packed up his paintbox and went down to the river. As he sat there, throwing stones into the water, as one does, my boy, a salmon came idling by, all silver and sparkly.

'A most perfectly pleasant afternoon to you, young man,' bubbled the salmon when she saw the boy in his smock. 'And what are you doing here in the sunshine?'

'Good afternoon, madam,' said the boy, most polite in his manners, 'I was hoping to paint everyone different colours. But I fear that I am not very good at it. I don't suppose you would care to stay here awhile and let me try out my paintbox?'

'But of course and yes indeed,' answered the salmon. 'And would you like to paint all my family and friends as well?'

And so the boy spent the entire afternoon, until teatime when his mummy had particularly asked him to be home, in painting all the salmon who swam up and waited awhile. And the colour he chose for them was a deep and hypnotising blue, flecked in places by white. And what a splendid shoal of fine fish they were after that. They all thanked the boy grandly and graciously and paraded up and down the river. And the boy went home for his tea, just as his mummy had told him, and with plenty of time to wash his hands.

But, oh but: what a dreadful thing happened to all those many salmon when they came to swim up the rapids and the waterfalls, as salmon do just to be so very special and brave. The rushing and roaring waters rubbed off all the blue colour and the white and carried great clouds of paint down the river and into the sea. Which is why, my boy, the salmon are silver and the whales are blue and the waves are flecked with white when they break upon the beach.

As the days went by and the weeks, animals and birds and fish came to see the boy. For they had seen the magnificent goldfish, and the splendid tiger, and the wondrous kingfishers and parrots, and wished so much to be colourful too. And the boy sat and he painted them; and some of those he painted had no problems and were inimitably splendid; and some of those he painted had accidents and their colours ran or smudged or washed off. Some were more difficult, some were easy. Animals like the giraffe, the snakes, the zebra were inordinately difficult; others like the mole and the polar bear were so easy; and some, like the rhinoceros and the hippopotamus and the hare - well, they never bothered to come. The birds, on the whole, were well-behaved (but the peacock was a VERY difficult bird to do, and he spent a whole day on him). And the fish, if they kept still, were a pleasure to paint.

And from that day on, the animals have had to be painted over and over again. When the Spring comes and the sun shines again over the forest, many animals and birds come back for a new coat of paint, to make them clean and new again for the year; and when baby animals are born, he has to make a house-call with his box of paints. The babies are sometimes very difficult, because they are so wriggly and will not stay still for more than a few minutes at a time. The baby tigers are wonderfully difficult, since they always jump about, and sometimes the stripes get smudged, and they have to be washed down and the work starts again. The boy has helpers nowadays, because there are just so many animals and birds and fish to be painted. And his mummy thinks he goes through a most dreadful amount of paint.