

Ethel's Big Day

by Samuel Palin

© *Samuel Palin – please email feedback to
samuelpalin@gmail.com*

It was a hot day in Africa, where Ethel lived. A very hot day. It was hot even for Africa, which is a very hot place. It was so hot the icing on the bun Ethel had brought for lunch had melted by lunchtime. It was so hot that instead of gymnastics, Ethel's class sat in the shade of the acacia tree and sang songs.

Still, there were Things To Be Done, whether it was hot or not. It was too important a day to miss. If it is your birthday, you don't just skip it because it is too hot, or too rainy. Not that it was anyone's birthday. If anything, it was *even more* important than that.

You see, today was the day Ethel's class became grown-ups. After today, Ethel could say, "I am a Big Elephant, and my name is Ethel." She would even have the certificate to prove it.

So after Ethel and her friends had finished singing

songs, and finished eating their lunch (Ethel had to be careful not to drip icing on herself), they plodded down to the lake.

Becoming a Big Elephant meant learning a very special skill – a skill that all Big Elephants need. Today, Ethel's class would learn how to drink with their trunks. Every day before today, when she was thirsty, Ethel had drunk from her mummy's trunk, or from her teacher's trunk. Or, if there were no Big Elephants around, she had simply lain down in the water and slurped straight into her mouth. But today, all that changed.

Ethel was very excited.

When the elephants reached the edge of the lake, they lined up along the shore in age order. Billy Bigtrunk, the oldest elephant in Ethel's class at three-and-three-quarters, was at one end. Millie, age two-and-three-fifths, was at the other. Ethel was in-between, though closer to Millie than Billy – she had only just celebrated her third birthday.

The class waited expectantly for their teacher, Miss

Lilylump, to tell them what to do. She was standing knee-deep in the lake in front of the class. "Today is a very important day for all of you," said Miss Lilylump seriously. "After today, you will not have to ask me for a drink when you are thirsty. It will be a great relief." Miss Lilylump looked up and down the line of elephants in front of her and sighed. Ethel could tell that Miss Lilylump would find it a very great relief indeed.

"Who knows what the trick to drinking for yourself is?" Miss Lilylump asked. Several of Ethel's class raised their trunks. Miss Lilylump picked out Ben, who had raised his trunk higher and faster than anyone.

"Snuffling up water without sneezing, Miss."

"Snuffling up water without sneezing," Miss Lilylump repeated. "Exactly, Ben. Now class, don't be alarmed — you will not get it at first, and we have the entire afternoon. I'd like you all to step into the water and have a go."

And so the whole line of elephants, from Millie to

Billy, paddled into the water. Billy was the first to put his trunk under and attempt a snuffle.

"Aaaaaaa-TISHOO!" He sneeze almost immediately, emitting a jet of water from his trunk.

"Atishoo!" "Atishoo!" "Aaaa-TISHOOOOO!"

One by one, the whole class fell into fits of sneezing, spraying water everywhere.

Ethel was the last to step forward. Very hesitantly, she lowered her trunk towards the lake's surface. She only snuffled very gently, but nevertheless, she sneezed loudest of all.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaa-TI-SHOOOOOOOO!"

Ethel sneezed so hard that she fell onto her bottom, and everyone laughed. The whole class had tried and failed, and none of them wanted to embarrass themselves further, but slowly, with Miss Lilylump's encouragement, they came forward for second and third and fourth attempts. They snuffled and they sneezed away, for I-don't-know-how-long. They

snuffled until their heads ached and their trunks felt fuzzy.

Then all of a sudden, Billy did it. He snuffled hard, and his trunk swelled with water, but no sneeze followed. Everyone stopped what they were doing and stared at him. Billy stood stock-still as the water poured back out of his trunk. He looked more surprised than anyone.

"Gooooood!" Miss Lilylump exclaimed. "Can you do that again, Billy?"

Billy dipped his trunk into the water and snuffled once more. Ethel expected a big sneeze, but nothing happened. Again, Billy let the water drain out of his trunk. "Very impressive!" cried Miss Lilylump. "But, next time, try drinking the water, instead of letting it all drip out."

The whole class giggled, and Billy scowled. He lowered his trunk again with a determined look on his face. This time he curled his trunk around to direct the water into his mouth. "Well done, Billy!" said Miss Lilylump. Billy stood on his hind legs and

bowed to the class. Billy was a bit of a show-off.

"Now," said Miss Lilylump. "Who's going to be next?"

Ten minutes later, several more of Ethel's classmates had done it Ben, Bessie, Nessie, Hannah and Half-Tusk were all snuffling happily away. Eventually, there was just Ethel left. Each of her sneezes seemed bigger than the last. As the rest of her class played happily in the water, Ethel got very upset.

"There there," said Miss Lilylump, patting Ethel on the head with her trunk. "You'll get the hang of it." But try as she might, Ethel did not get the hang of it. The sun was already setting. It was not hot any more. Still Ethel sneezed and sneezed, unable to hold a single drop of water in her trunk.

Eventually she had to give up. It was time for the elephants to go home. Ethel's trunk was tingling and her eyes were streaming. She lay down in the water to take a drink the effort of snuffling and sneezing had made her very thirsty. "You can try again tomorrow," said Miss Lilylump gently. "There's no rush."

Ethel ran home in floods of tears. When she got to the end of her road, she saw her family standing in front of the house. They were waiting there to congratulate her. Her big brother Eddy was holding a big pink balloon with 'Well Done Ethel' printed on it in neat green letters.

She ran straight past them into the house and up to her bedroom, flinging the door closed. There, she hid under the blankets and wept. After a few minutes, her Mummy came in. "Oh Ethel," she said. "Don't cry." She pulled back the blankets and wiped away Ethel's tears with a red spotted handkerchief. "Tell me what happened."

Between sobs, Ethel told her Mummy what had happened that afternoon: how everyone except her had learnt how to snuffle. At the end of her story, her Mummy smiled at her. "You know Ethel, it took me three days to master snuffling."

Ethel looked up with wide eyes. "Three days? Really?"

"Really." Three days! Ethel realised she was being hard on herself. Being a bad snuffler was not the end of the world. She would just have to be more patient.

--

The next day, Ethel got up before dawn and went straight down to the lake. She could get a couple of hours' snuffling practice in before school – surely, she would crack it in that time.

She snuffled away as the sun peeked out from under the horizon and began its slow journey across the sky. Unfortunately, things did not go according to plan. Just like before, as soon as the water went in, it came straight back out with a loud 'ATISHOO'.

By the time Ethel had to leave for class, her trunk ached terribly. She was desperately disappointed. She knew that her classmates would laugh at her when she got to school. But she also knew that it would not be forever. *Elephants are supposed to be patient, aren't they?* she thought to herself.

All morning, Ethel's class teased her – especially

Billy and his gang. She had barely sat down when Billy hissed from across the classroom: "Thirsty, Ethel?" The other boys copied the joke, trying to impress him.

When Ethel stepped out into the yard at break time, she found herself surrounded by a ring of her classmates chanting at her:

"Water water, everywhere, but not drop to drink!
Water water, everywhere, which Ethel cannot drink!"

They sang the rhyme over and over again. Ethel burst into tears once more, and ran off to the far end of the trunkball pitch. She threw herself down on the grass and sobbed quietly. After a few minutes, Ethel heard footsteps coming towards her. She looked up to see her brother Eddy standing over her.

Eddy was two years older than Ethel. Like most brothers and sisters, they did not always get on. They fell out over who could eat the last bun, or who could play with the rubber ball. They fell out about what to have for dessert, about whose toys were whose, about which picnic blanket to use. In fact, they fell out

about pretty much everything, or nothing at all. But Ethel knew that Eddy would always stick up for her when it mattered.

"Don't listen to them," Eddy told Ethel, sitting down next to her on the grass.

"Easy for you to say, Eddy. You're a snuffling *expert*." It was true. In fact, Eddy had been the very first elephant in his class to snuffle successfully. The whole family had been very proud.

"I know." There was a long pause. Eddy felt terrible for Ethel — and he knew that his snuffling talents must be making it even worse. "I do have an idea, though."

Ethel looked at Eddy. "What?"

"Do you know who Mackenzie is?"

Ethel racked her brains. The name seemed familiar, but she could not put face to it. She shook her head.

"He's an owl. He lives in the orchard."

Of course! Mackenzie the Wise. Many of the Big Elephants in the village went to old Mackenzie when they needed advice.

"Do you think he would help me, Eddy? I don't even know him."

"Do you have a better idea?"

Eddy had a point. The only other thing Ethel could do was carry on practising, and that had not been going well so far. Besides, her trunk was so sore she thought it might drop off. So, instead of taking her normal route home at the end of school, Ethel veered off towards the orchard.

The orchard turned out to be a very scary place. The long, spindly shadows cast by the trees leapt at Ethel as the breeze rattled through them, making her jump. The sky overhead was still bright, but inside the orchard it was so dark Ethel could hardly see her feet.

She plodded on courageously until the sun hung low

in the sky like the ripe fruits on the trees all around her. Eventually, high up in an orange tree, Ethel found who she was looking for. "Mr. Mackenzie?" she ventured timidly. Eddy had warned her that owls were proud and haughty. She would have to be very polite.

Mackenzie the Wise peered down from his high branch. "Whoooooooooooooooooooo's there?" he hooted. It was so dark that she couldn't really see his body — only a bright yellow beak and a piercing pair of eyes.

"My name is Ethel," said Ethel in a small voice. "I am an elephant."

"Well I can see that, dear." Mackenzie leapt off the branch and swooped down to the ground a few metres away, then hopped towards Ethel. He leaned in close and scowled at her. "And how can I help you, Ethel the Elephant?"

"I have a problem...I wondered if I could ask your advice. I have heard that you are very wise."

"It is a matter of common knowledge that us owls are

full of uncommon knowledge." Mackenzie ruffled his feathers proudly. "Go on."

So Ethel told Mackenzie the Wise all about her recent troubles. He listened carefully, pacing to and fro, muttering and hooting to himself as she spoke. "Well dear, it just so happens that I *have* heard of this problem," said Mackenzie when Ethel had finished her story.

Ethel's face lit up. "You have! What do I have to do?"

"The solution, dear, is very simple. Bright lights."

Ethel was puzzled. "Bright lights?"

"Correct. If you look directly at a bright light — the sun, for instance — when you snuffle, all but the very sneeziest of sneezes will melt away."

It seemed like a strange idea to Ethel — but then she was no wise owl. "And what...what if that doesn't work, Mr. Mackenzie?"

The old owl looked deeply offended. "I'm afraid,

dear," he began curtly, "that if that doesn't work, you are on your own."

"OK." Ethel thanked Mackenzie and hurried home. She had found him rather arrogant, just as Eddy had warned her, and she had a hard time believing that a bit of sunshine was going to stop her gigantic sneezes. *Still*, she thought glumly, *I don't have any better ideas.*

--

When Ethel awoke the next morning she realised it had already been two days since he had first tried snuffling. Where did all the time go! She leapt out of bed and rushed down to the lake. Ethel still thought Mackenzie's idea was far-fetched, but she was keen to try it. The sun was just above the horizon – a huge, wobbling orange jelly. It was going to be another extremely hot day. A few birds were floating around on the surface of the lake, dozing under their wings. There were no other elephants to be seen.

Ethel lowered her trunk to the water, looking straight out across the lake – directly at the sun. She snuffled

deeply. For a moment, nothing happened. Her trunk was heavy with water, and the water stayed there. Ethel raised her brow in surprise. Had she finally done it? Was Mackenzie really as wise as he made out? Could she march into school with her head held high, a Big Elephant at last?

Then she felt a tingle spreading slowly upwards from the end of her trunk. *Oh no*, thought Ethel. Soon the tingle became a tickle, and the tickle became a hot itch. "Aaaaah " said Ethel. If only she could *just* hold it in. She kept her eyes fixed on the sun, though they prickled with pain. "Aaaaaah " But it was just too much to bear.

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA-TISHOOOOOO!" It was a bigger sneeze than ever. The nearby birds woke up suddenly and squawked in surprise. Ethel slumped down right there in the water, utterly wretched. For a moment, she had truly believed that that was it that she had finally done it. Now, she was back to square one. She made her way to school feeling very dejected.

--

Ethel stopped at Jenny's Deli to buy a bun for lunch. Jenny Jeffries was a friendly old giraffe whom everyone in the village knew and adored.

Jenny had one very distinctive feature: bright green fur. Every other giraffe Ethel had met – which was rather a lot of giraffes, all in all – had been a dusty yellow colour. Jenny was unique. Mummy said Jenny was a 'greengrosa'. Ethel did not know exactly what that meant, but she supposed it must have something to do with it.

"Morning, Ethel!" Jenny said brightly as Ethel walked into the deli. "Here for a bun? You're in luck – I've just taken them out of the oven!"

Jenny made the best buns in all of Africa. Ethel did her best to muster a smile. "Thank you, Miss Jeffries," she said politely. She pulled her purse from her satchel, and after some rummaging around found a small silver coin.

Jenny could tell Ethel was down in the dumps. "Not today, Ethel," said Jenny. "This one is on the house."

Ethel smiled for real now. She would have enough money to buy some chocolate mice on the way home. *That'll cheer me up*, she thought. Normally, Ethel was not allowed to buy sweets without her Mummy saying so but, given the circumstances, Ethel was sure she wouldn't mind. "Thank you, Miss Jeffries."

"You are very welcome. Now Ethel, is anything troubling you?"

Ethel looked up in surprise, and mumbled, "No, Miss Jeffries."

"Ethel," said Jenny sternly, "I have been telling you for years to call me 'Jenny'."

"No, Jenny."

"Are you sure?"

"Well..."

"It can feel good to talk about your problems, Ethel. And maybe I can help."

"You wouldn't understand," said Ethel sullenly, without looking up. "You don't have a trunk. Oh, how I wish I were a giraffe!" In the end, Jenny persuaded Ethel to tell her about what had happened.

"Well, Ethel," said Jenny, after Ethel had finished her story. "I am very sorry to hear about the trouble you've been having. You are right I don't have a trunk, so I can't quite understand what it is like. In fact, I have a long neck, so drinking is not too hard for me."

Ethel scowled at her. "You're *supposed* to be helping!"

Jenny smiled. "There is one thing I can understand, though."

"What is that?" asked Ethel.

"Ethel, you may have noticed that my coat is not exactly a *normal* colour for a giraffe. When I was little, the other giraffes found that very funny."

"I can imagi " blurted out Ethel. "I mean...I didn't

mean...I'm sorry."

"It's alright, Ethel. The thing is, I've learnt to be happy with being different. And you can, too.

"But I'm not going to be different forever, Miss Jeff ...Jenny."

"Perhaps not, Ethel. I hope not, if it is making you sad. But do try to remember one thing: sometimes, being different can be the best thing of all." There was a long pause. "Now, shouldn't you be getting to school? You must be late." Ethel looked at her watch. She certainly was! She thanked Jenny and rushed off, clutching her still-warm bun in her trunk.

School was even worse than the day before. The other elephants in Ethel's class mocked her, offering to give her a drink whenever Miss Lilylump's back was turned. All Ethel could do was get on with her work and try to ignore them.

The worst was when Ethel really was thirsty. Her classroom contained only a small sink, so it was impossible to drink without using your trunk. The

day got hotter and hotter, and Ethel got thirstier and thirstier, until eventually, Ethel had to ask Miss Lilylump for a drink. Her class dissolved into fits of laughter.

At lunchtime, Ethel sat on her own beneath the acacia tree and ate the bun Jenny had given her. She thought hard about what Jenny had said. She was not sure what to make of it. Ethel liked Jenny – she was glad Jenny was happy. Nevertheless, the thought of being different forever terrified her.

Ethel did not have the energy to go to the lake that evening. The next day was a Saturday, so she would have all day to practise. The best thing she could do, she decided, was to go to bed early and have a good night's sleep.

--

Even though she had not set her alarm, Ethel woke up at the crack of dawn on Saturday morning. For a moment her mind was clear of worries, but soon enough a very scary thought, like a big grey cloud, floated into her head and would not go away. Ethel's

Mummy had said that it had taken her three days to learn to snuffle. Ethel had first tried snuffling on Wednesday, and today was Saturday three days later.

Ethel replayed the last three days in her head. Her classmates taunts rang in her ears. The idea of hearing them again on Monday was too much to bear. "Today is the day," she said out loud. She sounded more confident than she felt.

It was still cool outside, though Ethel knew it was going to be yet another hot and sticky day. There was not a single cloud in the sky. When she got to the lake Ethel waded into the water and stuck her trunk beneath the surface.

Before she even began to snuffle, she felt a tickle like the sneeze was trying to get out. Sure enough, the moment she sucked inwards, she convulsed with great, booming sneeze:

"AAAAA TISHOOOO!"

Undeterred, Ethel tried again, and then again, and

again. A big sneeze followed every single snuffle. An hour later, Ethel was still no Big Elephant, and her trunk felt very fuzzy indeed.

Ethel was crestfallen. She sank down on the bank with a frown in her brow and tears in her eyes. A little part of her had thought that, on the third day, the curse might be magically lifted, and she would be able to snuffle just as well as the Eddys and Billys of this world. But it was not to be.

Now what? she thought to herself. *I suppose I'll have to get used to being different.* The thought did not make her feel very cheerful.

"What's up?" said a voice just behind Ethel's shoulder.

Ethel nearly jumped out of her skin! She span round to find a young pelican standing behind her with a concerned expression on his face. Ethel noticed that one of his wings was much smaller than the other.

"Who are you?" said Ethel, picking herself up out of the water.

"I'm Pete."

"Hi Pete, I'm Ethel." She tried to put a brave face on for this unexpected visitor, though she did not feel very sociable.

"Nice to meet you," said Pete. "So, what's up?"

"Oh, I have to learn how to be happy being different," Ethel said gloomily.

"I know that feeling," said Pete.

Ethel's ears perked up. "You do?"

Pete nodded grimly. "Uh huh."

"How come?"

"I can't fly," explained Pete. "See this wing?" He pointed with his beak at his crumpled left wing. It was no more than half the size of his right one. "It's been that way since I hatched."

"I'm sorry," said Ethel.

"Me too. But you get used to it. There's just only thing that *really* bothers me, to be honest. I wish I could see the world from above. Just once? That's the point of being a bird, right?"

"I guess."

Ethel suddenly realised she was very thirsty. She was just crouching down in the water to take a drink, when Pete said: "Hey, that looks awkward. Do you want some help?"

"I'm OK," said Ethel.

But Pete had already bowed and filled his beak. He tilted it towards Ethel, so a stream of water fell into her mouth. Ethel gulped gratefully.

"Thank you," she said.

"No problem.

They sat down on the shore together and looked out

across the lake in silence. Then Ethel had an idea.

"Would you like to ride on my back for a bit, Pete?"

Pete nodded shyly. Ethel lay down and let him climb up onto her neck. She stood up slowly. Pete grabbed hold of Ethel's ears to balance himself as Ethel started to walk forward.

"Woah," said Pete. "I'm flying!"

Ethel walked around the lake and then into town, with Pete sitting proudly on her back. Every animal they passed turned and looked. *What a peculiar pair!* they thought. And it was true — they *were* a peculiar pair. Not that that bothered Ethel and Pete.

The two of them soon became famous friends. They would go everywhere together, Pete riding on Ethel's back, both of them as happy as crocodiles. Without their problems, Ethel realised, they never would have met. *Sometimes*, she thought to herself, *being different can be the best thing of all.*