

ARMADILLO AND HARE AND THE FLAMINGO AFFAIR

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Small Tales from the Big Forest

Armadillo and Hare

Armadillo and Hare and the

Very Noisy Bear



Jeremy Strong

SMALL TALES FROM THE BIG FOREST



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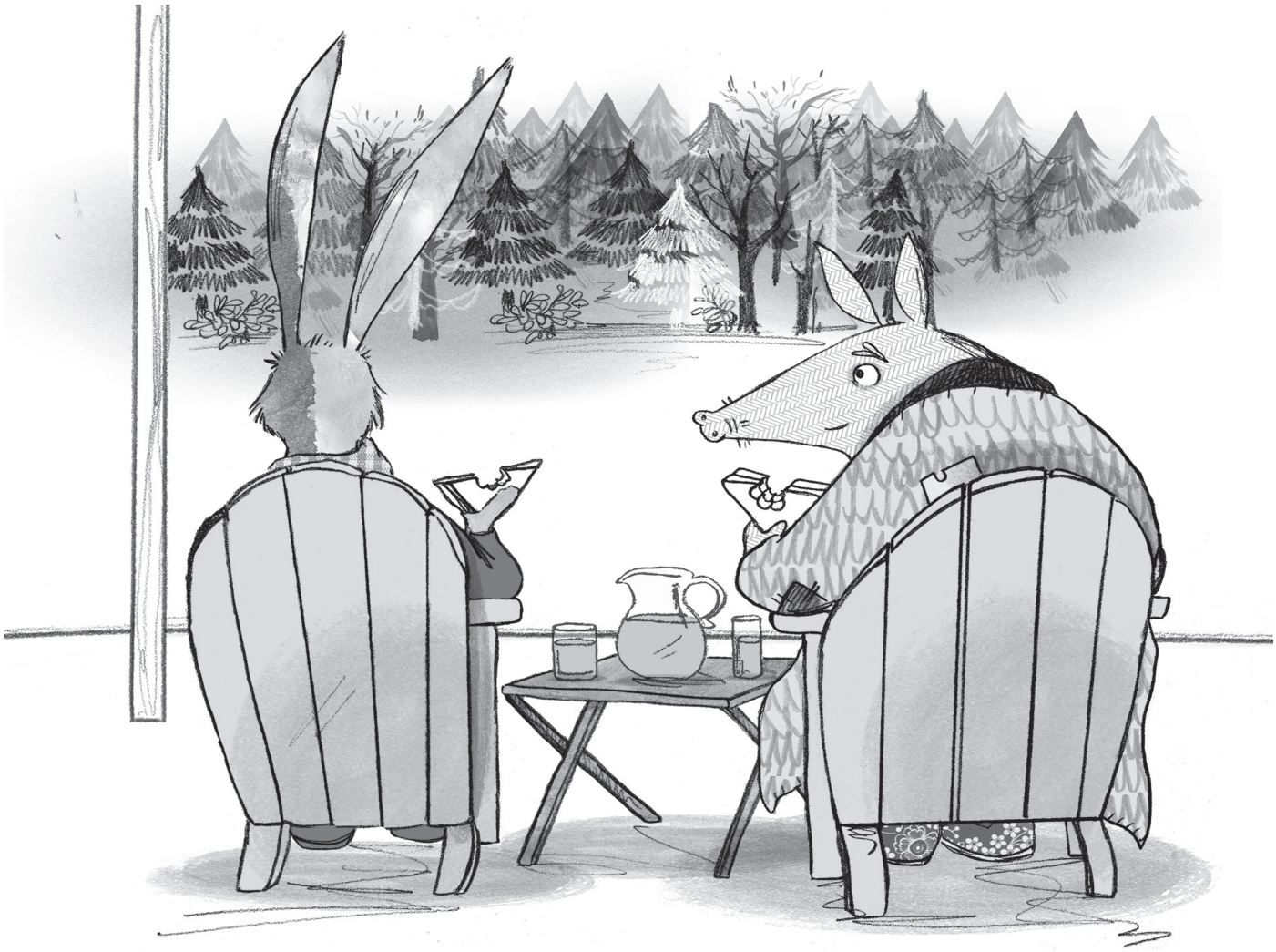
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I have dedicated books to my wonderful Gillie before, but as I am now even more dedicated to her I'm making another. Chapter 6 only exists because of Gillie's cucumbers. JS

For Natasha and Nana. Without your help this book would probably not even be halfway done. RB



A Song Without Words





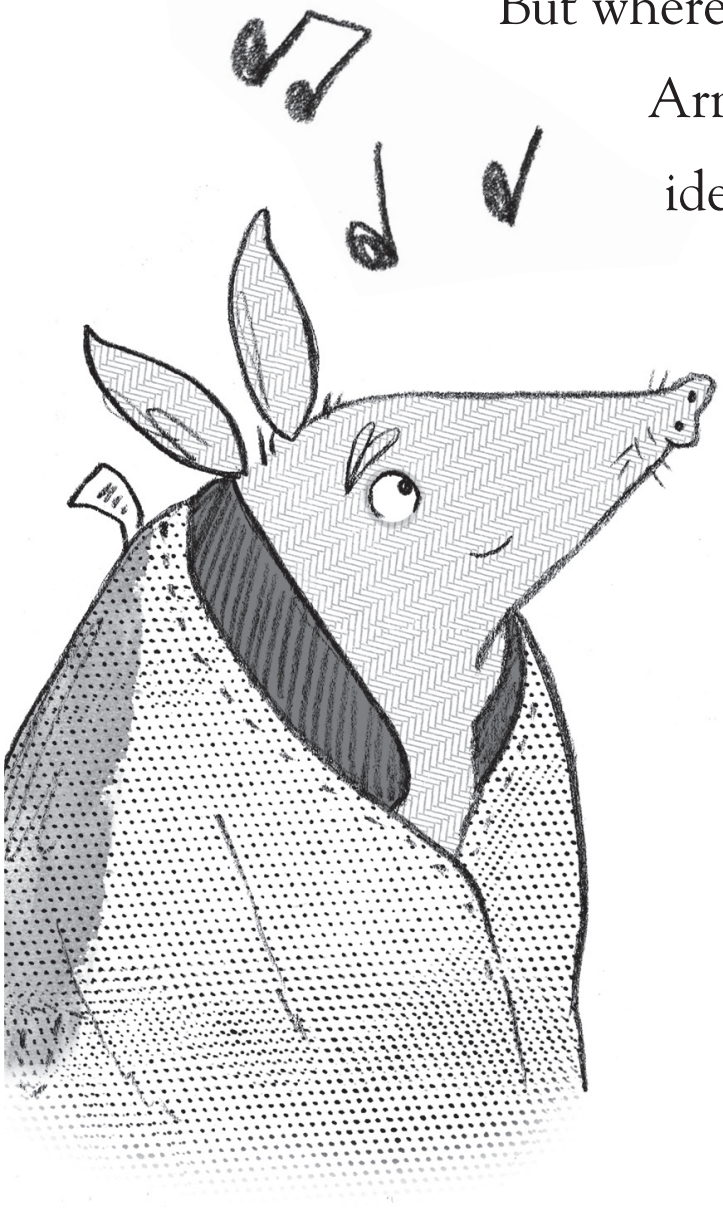
The night's deep darkness was soft and warm. Hare woke slowly, like a bubble drifting up through water before finally floating on the surface. What was that strange and distant sound? His ears were on alert. If Hare's ears were the hands on a clock they were saying it was ten to two in the morning. Which it was.

Now his ears began to sway gently to the distant song. He got out of bed and padded across to his open window. A light breeze brought the strange and beautiful song closer still.

Hare's bedroom door squeaked open and Armadillo appeared. He was wearing his dressing gown, inside out.

'Ah, you've heard it too,' Armadillo whispered.

'It's wonderful, magical,' Hare murmured. 'But where is it coming from?'



Armadillo grunted. 'No idea. All I can tell is that it's a song without words, but you sort of feel that there are words.'

'And the words are wonderful.' Hare nodded. 'It's so peaceful.'

The two companions stood in the darkness at the window until the song finished. Just as they turned away they heard a distant sing-song whisper on the wind.

'Goodnight, Big Forest. Sweet dreams. Goodnight.'

Armadillo and Hare looked at each other. 'Strange,' muttered Armadillo. 'But beautiful.'

'I've never heard anything like it,' said Hare. 'It was so magical. Ethereal.'

Armadillo's eyes widened and his snout twitched. 'Ethereal, eh? That's a rather splendid word, Hare. Where did it come from?'

'It was in one of my books. I thought I would try and remember it.'

'And so you have. Ethereal. I like that.' Armadillo headed for the door. 'I'm going

back to sleep. It's half-past two in the middle of the night.'

Hare smiled to himself in the dark and settled back into bed. He pulled the covers up to his chin. 'Goodnight,' he called out.

But there was only silence and the stars beyond.



Hare was up at daybreak. It was normally Armadillo who put breakfast together because he would be the earliest to get up. Hare liked to spend a bit of time first thing in the morning combing his long ears.

But today felt different. Was it something to do with the singing in the night? Perhaps it was, but Hare felt well rested, happy and – well, bouncy.



Now he bounced around the kitchen, putting out cups and plates, a jar of marmalade, and Armadillo's special tomato jam which he liked to eat with his morning cheese.

‘My goodness, you have been busy!’ Armadillo stood in the doorway and studied the breakfast table. ‘I was just popping down to do all that and now you’ve done it. Thank you, Hare. What a display! Do you know, I slept like a baby last night.’

‘Hmm! Babies don’t snore.’ Hare smiled. ‘And look at you, Armadillo. You’ve got your dressing gown on inside out, again!’

‘I like it like that,’ claimed Armadillo. ‘It stays cleaner for longer.’

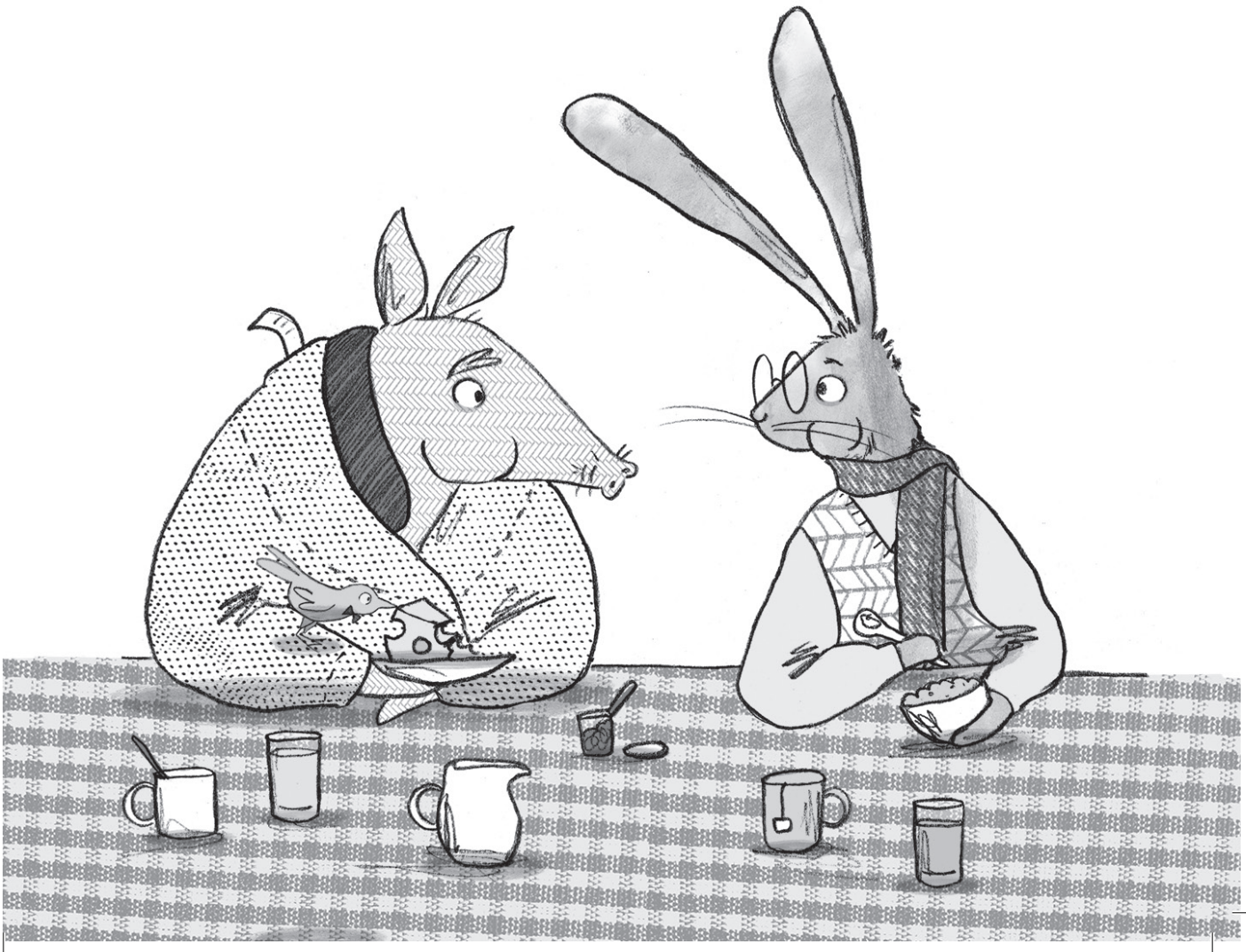
‘Not on the inside,’ argued Hare.

‘But the inside is the outside and the outside is the inside so what you see is the outside, and the outside that was the outside is now the inside. See?’

Hare was creasing up with laughter. ‘No,

I don't see. You've exhausted me. A moment ago I was all bouncy. Then you came into the room and I feel as if I've just got a puncture and I'm slowly going down. Like a tyre. Please stop talking in riddles. Come to the table and have some breakfast.'

Armadillo sat down. Soon they were both silent. Hare was munching muesli and Armadillo was chewing cheese.



Then, out of nowhere, the singing began again. They both shot upright and stopped eating. They pushed back their chairs and stared out over the meadow towards the Big Forest. But there was nothing to see. Then they heard a familiar ‘ping-ping’ and a ‘parp-parp’ and Wombat came into view on her bicycle. She was doing a handstand on the handlebars. Wombat was good at that sort of thing.



‘Isn’t it exciting?!’ she shouted as she passed the little log cabin. ‘Such beee-ooo-tiful singing. All night! It’s coming from near the lake! I’m going to see what it is. Come on!’

Hare and Armadillo dropped everything and hurried outside.

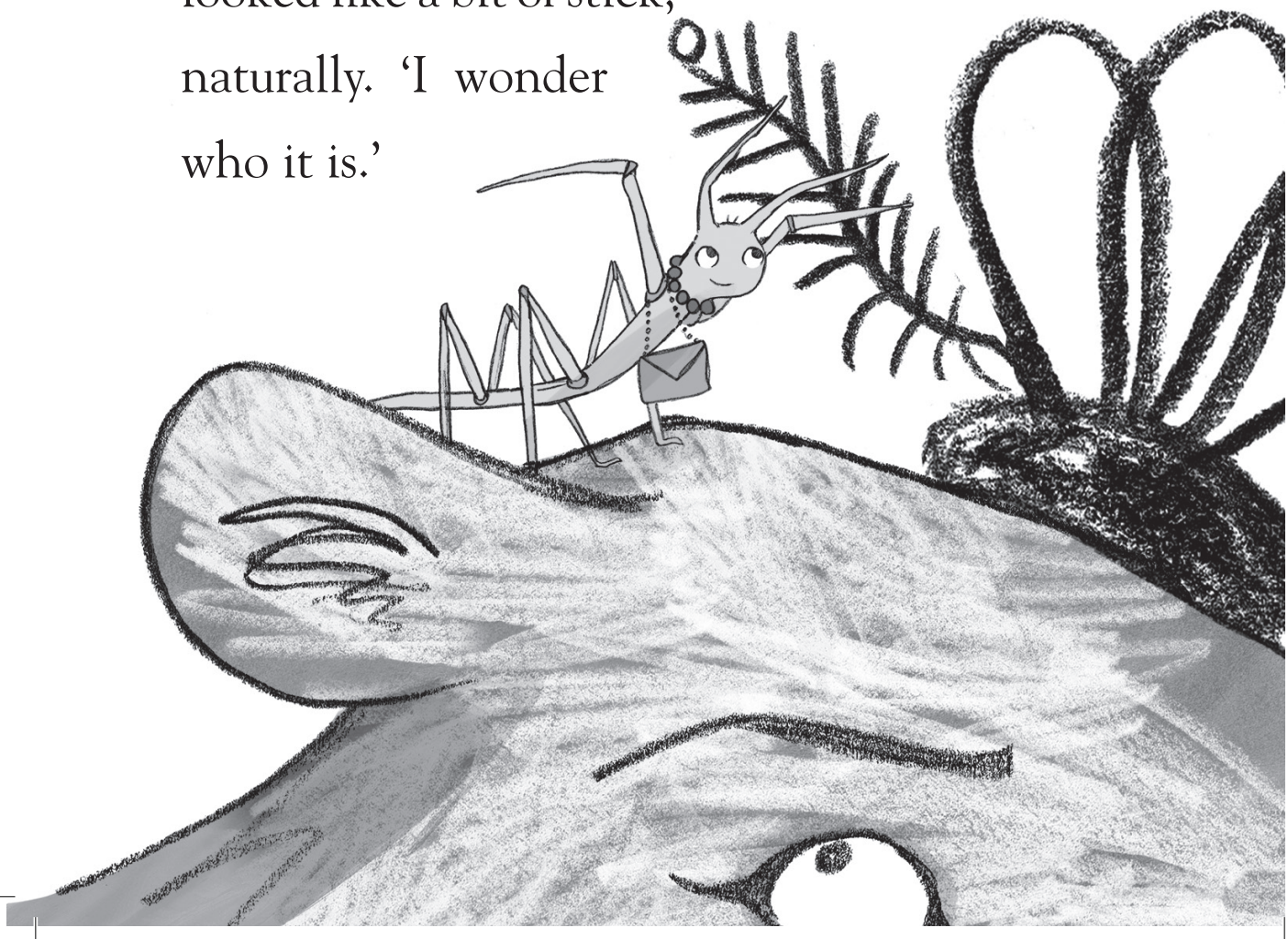
As they crossed the dew-spangled meadow they met up with Jaguar and her great friend Invisible Stick Insect.



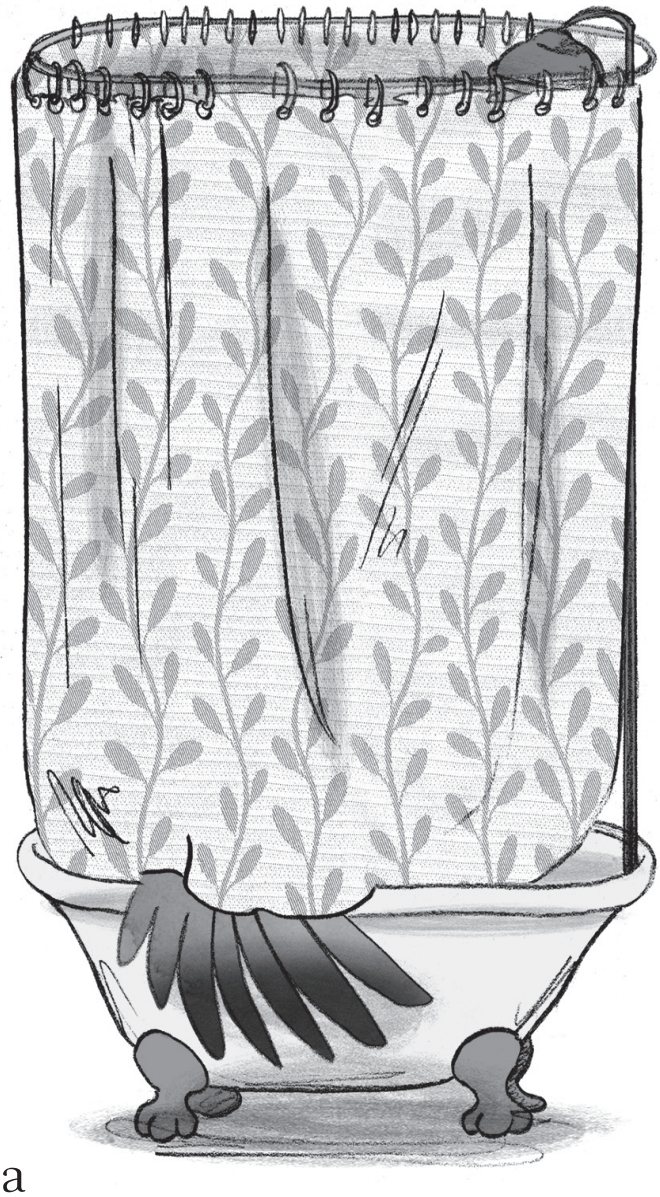
‘Interesting daywear, Armadillo,’ Jaguar remarked with a throaty chortle.

Armadillo grunted and snuffled. He tried to think of a smart reply, but couldn’t. Anyway, smart replies don’t really work if you’re wearing your dressing gown inside out.

‘It’s wonderful singing, isn’t it?’ squeaked Invisible Stick Insect. She was perched between Jaguar’s ears, where she looked like a bit of stick, naturally. ‘I wonder who it is.’



When they reached the edge of the lake they realised they were the last to arrive. Lobster, Elephant, Tortoise, Giraffe and Bear (of the polar variety) were already gathered together and staring.



There, right beside the edge of the lake, was a large bath. And in the bath there was an extraordinary bird. She was fabulously pink.

One gorgeous, black-tipped wing was draped over the edge. The long neck and head were decorated with necklaces, a pearl choker, and rainbow-bright feathers like a magnificent crest on her head. She had long eyelashes that fluttered above eyes that sparkled with joy – and mischief.

And, of course, there was the song, which continued, an endless melody that swooped and soared and hovered and dived, only to soar again until it slowly faded away and ceased.

Then the wonderful bird turned her head with its enormous shining beak and gazed back at them. She sat up and opened both wings wide, and everyone gasped. There were feathers upon feathers, ever more colourful, dripping from the tips of her wings.



‘Darlings!’ she sang. ‘Welcome to my world!’

‘Her world?’ muttered Armadillo. ‘It’s not her world. It’s our world. She’s only just arrived!’

‘Sssh,’ whispered Hare sharply.

‘Darlings, sweethearts! I’m so enchanted to see you all. Oh, look at you, Jaguar. Such beauty and grace. And you there, Armadillo. Ha ha! You’re outrageous! Wearing your dressing gown! Inside out! I love it. You’ve made my day, Pops!’



Armadillo’s snout almost tied itself into a knot. ‘Pops?!’ he exploded. ‘Since when have I been called Pops?’

He pushed forward, clearing his throat loudly. 'The name,' he said, 'is Armadillo.'

The bird trilled a laugh. 'I know that. But in my heart you will always be Pops, and I love you, darling! You really are quite the thing.'

Armadillo was not at all sure that he wanted to be 'quite the thing'. For a start he wasn't sure what being quite the thing actually meant.

'Look at all of you sweethearts! Aren't you gorgeous?' The bird blew kisses to everyone with her wings. 'I love you all. Let me introduce myself. I am Flamingo, singer, dancer, prancer and performer extraordinaire.' Flamingo rose up and stepped from the bath. The gasp from the crowd was even louder.

Flamingo had legs. She had legs that



seemed to go on, and on – and on.

'Are they telescopic?' asked Tortoise, before toppling backwards from having to stare up so far.

'Phoowee!' said Elephant. 'Sheesh!'

Hare sighed and shook his head. 'Extraordinary,' he murmured. And for once Armadillo was speechless.

Flamingo stepped forward, gave an elegant curtsy and then – shimmered.

With her wings spread, Flamingo made her entire body tremble, so that all the jewels and feathery extensions sparkled and glittered with delight.

Giraffe was entranced. Wombat shook her head as if she couldn't believe such beauty. Hare's ears were dizzy with admiration. Armadillo's eyes simply boggled.

Flamingo soaked up their adoration. 'Darlings, I feel fabulous! I am fabulous!'

Only Lobster crossed her claws over her chest and muttered darkly, 'Who does she think she is? With a bath of all things! Beside a lake? A bath?'

Bear pushed forward and bowed deeply.

‘Madam,’ he growled. ‘I am Bear, of the polar variety, and I am almost a doctor. Furthermore, it may interest you to know that I play the drums.’

Flamingo’s eyes widened to huge, glossy, shining discs. ‘The drums! But darling, you’re a



musician! We must work together! I shall sing like an angel – a large, very pink angel – and you, my sweet, you will hit your . . . things.'

'Drums,' Bear reminded her.

'Yes! We shall make music. We shall dance and sing! Darlings, you are so lucky I am here!'



Several animals in the audience clapped loudly. Tortoise (who had a French mother) even shouted, 'Ooh la la!'

But Armadillo nudged his friend hard and hissed in his ear, 'She called me Pops!'