

Nothing Mere About Them
June 2020

As a little girl, I loved tiny things of magic, with glitter and surprise. I loved the make-believe of Disney movies and books, nearly every scene offering the animation of a tea kettle, the anthropomorphizing of sweet mice and impatient blue birds, the beloved heroines. To be honest, I wanted to live forever in the world of make-believe. I would not be content with Snow White costumes or having to pretend my grandfather's goldfish were the seven lovable dwarves. I wanted to BE Snow White. Otherwise, I would be forever miserable.

I finally realized, one sad day, that I was stuck with me, that I would never be Snow White, no matter how hard I held my breath and squeezed shut my eyes and willed me to an enchanted forest. No matter how, when I was alone, I danced and sang and batted my big brown eyes at my great aunt's Airedale, wishing him to be a mouse that drove the carriage that flitted on stars.

The residue from that unfulfilled desire, though, has never quite left me. A grown and responsible woman, I can assure you that my teddy bear is real. I still imagine toads with rumpled hats sitting on the green bank of the forest pond we pass on our hikes. I still believe that pigs dance the country jig and rabbit mothers read to their kits while all sip hot cocoa.

Life at times is mundane. So much realism surrounds me. A car is a car, a tree is a tree. The creek near our house reveals no toads in fancy suits. My imagination grows rusty. I search for it but am smacked by swirling to-do lists.

Yet, not that many months ago, a dear friend invited me to enjoy with her, for one afternoon, a world of enchantment. A world that nearly obliterates the rigid boundary between what is real and what is fabulous. "The willing suspension of disbelief," we say in theatre. "Oh," you would say, "it was just an afternoon with some exotic little animals."

"Oh," I will say, "it was much more than that." It was a day with erdmännchen. Translated, "little men that live under the earth".

The journeys of Disney heroes and heroines are often fraught with hardship before the prize is won. My friend and I, both nervous about flying, spent hours in flight to Los Angeles. There, we rented a car, our destination Palm Springs, where we would spend the night and set out the following morning for Morongo Valley, wherein the erdmännchen live. We had been warned of the LA Freeway. It was more than we imagined, a battle that lasted for four hours in a multiple-lane concrete trough of thick and speeding traffic, baffling signage, and promised through lanes that suddenly switched to unforgiving exits.

The Fellow Earthlings' Wildlife Center was our reward, our happily ever after. Traffic and tension dissipated as we wound our way on the sandy road that led to the sanctuary. Finally arrived, we waited as Pam Bennett-Wallberg opened wide the gate and beckoned us to drive through and park under the flag of South Africa. As we stretched our way out of the car, she called out, "The meerkats are glad you've come! The meerkats will be so happy to meet you!"

Pam Bennett-Wallberg is the director of this rescue home for meerkats. She is also a member of the Royal Geological Society. Most importantly, she was the consultant in the creation of the famous meerkat Timon, of the first *The Lion King*. The sanctuary is, according to its website, the “only privately licensed facility that specializes in caring for meerkats.”

Standing under the tall pines, so far from buildings and streets and human busyness, I remarked to Pam that I felt a sensation of resolute peace and calm. “Many people who visit here say that,” she said, her smile slow and genuine. Was the place enchanted?

Tall, lithe, and willowy, Pam is in no way obtrusive. As she led us to her cottage nestled near the meerkats’ vast shelters, she stepped lightly, gracefully. We would soon realize her colorful and tenacious nature from her interactions with the meerkats and her stories of rescue, but to describe her would clearly suggest that, like the animals to whom she has dedicated her life, she is a gentle, quiet, respectful earthling. Her voice low and soothing, she is a bit of a whisper. She wore plain, dark clothing, the only color her lip tint and ZIMBABWE in red letters above her hat brim. A wisp of a woman, yes, but her strength and resolve were not to be dismissed as she later told us stories of the dangers and obstacles she faced in rescuing meerkats abused by black marketeers, exotica-driven moguls, and ill-advised zookeepers. A humble heroine.

Entering Pam’s home, where my friend and I signed our visitors’ contracts, I felt as if I had stepped into Snow White’s cottage. All was quiet, calm, and neat. From outside, the pine trees whispered, the shadows of their branches dancing on the walls. Throughout the room were miniature totems of peace and good will. Wall décor reminded visitors that we must all attend to peace and harmony as dwellers on this planet. Everywhere were porcelain, wooden, crystal meerkat figurines peering from shelf perches, some smiling, some inquisitive, all proud. Pam explained that meerkats prefer voices and movements that are quiet, small, delicate, and careful. We were, at no time during our visit, to be loud, large, abrupt, or clumsy. Snow White would have agreed, and I wondered if Pam’s tea kettle danced.

We left Pam’s cottage and took a winding, pine-needle layered trail through the stillness and hush of our surroundings—the day’s heat the only intruder—where shelters and the pine woods blended together. These shelters were not cages. Each one displayed dignity in its simple vastness and the inclusion of a safety anteroom that was built as a small, quaint, rustic cottage—a replica of Disney forest homes—with pine paneling, ornate shuttered windows, wreaths, and carved wooden plaques bearing the names of the very important occupants.

We came to a shelter, the cottage plaque bearing the names of the meerkats who were awaiting our arrival: Hakuna, Kulu, and Kavango. We entered the small cottage and firmly closed the door behind us. Pam instructed us to don gloves that would protect both the meerkats and our hands and would serve as a “dish” for the live mealy worms we would feed them. Pam reminded us that we were to pet the fragile foot-tall, two-pound meerkats with only two fingers—middle and ring. Mere whispers, like Pam had become as their caregiver. Pam slipped through the opposite door, closing it securely, for the cottage-anteroom existed to protect meerkats from slipping out into the dangers of life beyond the Wildlife Center. After ensuring that the meerkats were far away from the door, Pam opened it and told us to come quickly.

Pam said, “The meerkats are happy you’re here.” With that, we entered a different world.

Pam pointed to a faded blue quilt. As we lowered ourselves to where we would sit for over an hour, I realized that the shelter might be like the endless Kalahari Desert of southern Africa, the meerkat’s native habitat. The shelter frame was created from stout, massive wood beams, topped by a wood-slatted roof. Airy but sturdy wire mesh fit taut over the frame, the seams well sutured. The mesh, guaranteed to halt a raptor’s talons, extended up and over, without a gap, and then down and under, ten feet below the ground. No meerkat could dig out; crawling critters could not tunnel in. The floor of the meerkats’ shelter was a toy-filled, hilly, tunnel-plenty playground of deep-layered luscious sand sprinkled with pine needles. The illusion of the shelter, set about by the tall pines, was that it really was not there at all.

“Just wait,” said Pam, extending her arm as would a dancer toward the sand dunes. All she lacked was a magic wand. In an instant, there was movement from afar. Padding silently, stopping, standing alert, padding a bit more, Hakuna, Kulu, and Kavango came closer. They crawled to Pam, gained confidence, crawled to the strangers. They immediately exuded intellect and curiosity. Pam said, “They’re so easy to anthropomorphize.” Yet, weren’t they dissolving the wall between human and wild animal? In minutes, sensing new folks to entertain, the meerkats stared at and studied us, tapped at our hands and legs, cavorted, and showed us how they use their bodies to draw in sunshine, alert to danger, gather the mob, and endear their way into our hearts. They presented and played with their toys, like children.

After a time, Pam shook mealy worms from a plastic container into our palms. Sensing we were good people, the meerkats readily slurped up the slithering chow. When empty, our palms were tapped by long black finger claws, a head turned toward Pam, the source of the food. One meerkat began a game with Pam: fuss for food, then ignore it when Pam sifted it into her hand. The game wasn’t enough; the smart little fellow kept looking at me and my friend, as if asking, “Are you watching this performance? Isn’t it great?” Kulu, who became my buddy, curling up just behind me when taking a break, decided I was paparazzi. After repeatedly tapping at my camera, he stood at attention, turned his head this way and that, finally decided on his “good side” and held the pose until I snapped his picture. Papparazzi went on and on. Kulu clearly loved the spotlight.

“The meerkats are so glad you’re here,” said Pam. I noticed that her gestures and casual poses were not unlike those of her meerkat friends. I sensed the mutual trust. I sensed for just a moment that Pam and the meerkats planned this day, as if creating a documentary. Pam told us of the Wildlife Center’s cookbook, *Great Grub from the Meerkat Café*. I have since purchased it. Delightful for all ages, it is helping the Center during the pandemic shutdown. The illustrations capture the antics of real meerkats; the recipes are as animated as the erdmännchen.

Soon it was time to leave although Pam and the meerkats seemed in no hurry to move on to their next engagement. Outside the shelter, we human earthlings hugged. Pam walked us to our car and said, “The meerkats thank you for coming. The meerkats are happy you came.” The meerkats, tiny things of magic.

Why, I thought, does she speak for them when surely, like Timon, they can speak for themselves?