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PRIVATE GAME RESERVE



WHEN HIPPO WAS HAIRY



Long ago, hippos did not live in rivers and pools; they lived in the bush with other herd animals. In those days, Hippo had a very fine coat of glossy chestnut-brown hair. He also had silky, soft ears and a beautiful bushy tail, of which he was overly proud.

Every day at noon when he had his drink he would spend hours gazing at his own reflection in the water, turning this way and that to admire himself from every angle. His vanity was so great, that he demanded that all the other animals should praise his beauty.

One day, when he was at the water's edge admiring his own reflection, he said to himself, "Oh, how handsome I am! Not a bit like that stupid hare with his coarse coat, long ears and silly twitchy nose. What a ridiculously short tail he has and how clumsily he hops!" Unfortunately for Hippo, Hare just happened to be nearby and he overheard what Hippo was saying. He was furious. He decided that Hippo needed to learn humility.

After thinking for a while, Hare collected a large pile of soft, dry grass under a large umbrella tree. He offered it to Hippo saying, "Oh magnificent Hippo! Here is a warm bed that I have prepared for you since winter is on its way and the nights are growing cold." Hippo accepted the gift condescendingly and gave Hare a haughty nod. "Yes, Hare," he said, "I must be looked after. I am glad to see that you realise your responsibilities!" Hare nearly choked with rage. What a vain creature Hippo was! "Just you wait, my friend," he thought to himself. And he helped Hippo to settle down comfortably.

The Hare ran to a nearby village. While everyone in the village was busy drinking beer, he crept up to the cooking fire and stole some glowing embers. He carried them off on a piece of broken clay-pot.

Hippo was snoring happily in his warm bed of dry grass when Hare got back. Hare crept up and threw in the burning embers, blowing on them until he had a fine blaze going. Poor Hippo awoke to find that his fine coat of fur was on fire! He heard Hare laughing as he dashed off out of the way.

Hippo was confused and terrified, and at first he just thrashed about trying to beat out the flames. Soon, however, the fire reached his skin and in agony he charged away towards the waterhole. As he crashed through the bush, the fire spread to the dry winter grass and soon the whole area was ablaze.

Hippo reached the water just in time to save his life. The flames were put out and the cool water soothed his pain. The fire raged around the water's edge and Hippo had to hold his breath and sink beneath the surface. Only his eyes and nostrils showed when he came up for air.

The bushfire burned for a long time, but at last died out. Hippo climbed out of the pool. He felt stiff and sore, but he was very much alive. He was going to find Hare and give him the beating of his life.

But Hippo couldn't resist his habit of pausing to look at himself in the pool. He got a terrible shock. Reflected in the water was a pink-grey wrinkled, bald creature. He could not believe his eyes. His lovely bushy tail was gone, all his hair had been burnt off and ugly, round pink ears poked out where his long silky ones used to be. Without the fine glossy fur, his legs looked short and stubby and his flanks bulged with fat.

Hippo was horrified. He was ashamed, broken-hearted and, most of all, embarrassed. He rushed straight back into the water to hide his body from curious eyes. Weeping with shame at his dreadful appearance, he sank below the surface so that only his nostrils and eyes showed.

There he has remained ever since. Hippo is now a creature of rivers and lakes. Only at night, when no one can see him, does he come out to walk and graze at the edge of the forest, although he is still vain at heart. It happened so long ago that today hardly anyone remembers how Hippo once was hairy.



The END

