



*chris lafser*

# *The Owl and the Lion*

*A Christmas Story*

*by Bob Traupman*

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## THE BIRTH OF DANNY

Once upon a time in the forest in the hillsides of Virginia along the Shenandoah River there lived an oak tree with long twisted branches. It had borne the burden of the seasons and was very, very old. It was Melanie's favorite tree for nesting. Melanie and her husband Boswell were great gray owls familiar with this part of the forest. This season she had given birth to four owlets, so tender and cuddly in their downy fur. She named them Bridget and Sally and Tommy and Danny. She had a sense that something was special about this brood. One of them would be very special, she mused.

One night the wind was blowing furiously and the rain pelted the nest with long driving needles. Bridget and Sally and Tommy and Danny were whimpering with fright and shivering from the cold. Melanie spread her broad gray wings to protect them, but, of a sudden, a large branch came crashing into the nest and Danny uttered a shrill cry. Melanie looked down and saw that the twig had struck her son. She looked more closely and she saw that the branch had pierced his eye. She

had thought Danny was the special one and felt sad about this terrible thing that had happened to her baby.

"How will he survive with one eye out?" she thought. "How would he hunt mice and other rodents in the dark of night as owls are accustomed to do?"

She prayed an owl's prayer for her one-eyed son.

Melanie and Boswell kept Danny in the nest a little longer than the others. Perhaps he wouldn't be able to see well enough to catch his own prey. They got him fat, thinking the day would soon come when he might starve to death.

Soon the day came for him to leave the nest but he lingered in a nearby tree. Melanie and Boswell and his brother and sisters left for other parts of the forest and Melanie bid him good bye.

"I have done all I could," she said. "I hope you'll do OK."

She embraced him with her big gray wings for a long tender moment and flew off into the night.

## DANNY'S PROGRESS

Danny had a hard life. Very hard. He soon became a skinny little owl. No matter how he tried to catch mice, he succeeded only once in awhile. The other owls his own age and soon the other animals in the forest were unkind to him.

"Some owl he is," they said.

And "look how skinny he is. He can't even catch a mouse."

"He surely isn't one of us," one of the young owls said.

No one made life easier for Danny. And he longed for the days in the nest when Melanie took care of him. But he didn't even know where his mother was. Besides it was just not possible for him to go back to the nest.

Danny became very discouraged. He thought he would die. Again and again he asked: "Why is this happening to me?" But no answer came. He kept asking this question because he thought there would be an answer.

And one night he heard a voice saying, "Be patient, Danny. An answer will come some day. Just know that you are a very special owl." He looked around, but could see no one.

So Danny was patient, but patience didn't help much. Starving, he hung on because the voice said he was special. Whenever he got especially discouraged he heard the voice again.

There was a farm on the other side of the river, and one day Danny said, "I'll see if there's something to eat at the farm." Soon he found some corn and some potatoes -- not the usual food for an owl. He soon began to put some meat on his bones (so to speak).

One wintry night the farmer, Mr. Ritchly, came after him with a big long shotgun. He thought Danny was after his chickens.

"Please don't shoot, Mr. Farmer," Danny hooted, terrified. "I am starving to death. Please let me have some corn and some potatoes and I will be happy. I am not after your chickens. You see, I have only one eye and I cannot hunt. If I can't have some corn and potatoes, I will die."

Mr. Ritchly's expression was very skeptical and he came closer, still wielding his shotgun. Danny perched atop a telephone pole and was quivering with fright.

But the voice said, "Danny, don't fly away or he'll shoot. Let him see your eye."

And the farmer peered at him in the dim light. The old farmer took pity on this poor creature, and said "All right young owl, I will put some corn and some potatoes out for you on this post every night. But if I find that even one of my chickens missing, I will surely end your days.

"Thank you, Mr. Farmer. You are very kind," said Danny and flew away.

As he headed toward his favorite perch across the river, he heard the voice say. "Very good, Danny, my son, you are learning quickly. Learn to trust my voice and I will take care of you and you will live to be a very wise owl, just like your mom and dad.

Danny pondered what the voice had said as he hooted away the night. But he still wondered where the voice came from.

## DANNY'S MISSION

One night when all was quiet after a storm, Danny was nodding off in the middle of his midnight hoot.

"Danny!" he heard a voice calling.

This time he had the courage to ask, "Who? Who? hoot are you?"

"I am Daniel," the voice answered. "I lived on earth a long time ago as a human, Danny, and I have come to help you. You have suffered much, and you have learned many things from your suffering, more than you know."

Danny listened to the voice -- it seemed to come from inside him -- and he was puzzled because he thought he hadn't learned very much at all.

"You have wondered why all these things have happened to you," the voice said. They were a preparation for a very special mission which you are being appointed to.

"A very special mission?" Danny looked puzzled. How could he have a very special mission when there were so many things he couldn't do.

"Surely two-eyed owls would do better," Danny said to the voice.

"You'll do just fine," said Daniel."

Danny thought a while until the silence became uncomfortable. "Well, what's the mission?" he asked.

"You are to go to Africa." Daniel said.

"AFRICA!" Danny responded. That's a very long way, isn't it?

"Yes, a very long way," Daniel said.

"I can't do that," Danny protested. "I can't even fly straight. How can I fly to Africa?"

"Don't worry about that; you'll know when the time comes," he said, trying to get Danny to trust him. "And besides, you'll have lots of help," Daniel reassured him.

"Help?" Danny asked.

"Yes. Believe me, you'll do just fine," Daniel said.

"Wellll, O.K." Danny said. And he thought some more. "What do I do now?"

"Fly eastward, Danny. Fly to the Virginia coast, near Norfolk, and wait."

"Is that all you are going to tell me?" Danny asked.

"That's all for now. Talk to you later." Daniel said.

"Bye," Danny said. And he sat for a very long while wondering what was in store for him. "A special mission???" he thought. "Sounds important."

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He didn't wait for the next night. He flew during the day. Besides, he could see better.

Finally, he could see the great harbor. Perched on a telephone pole, he thought he'd better see if he was in the right place.

"Pardon me, mister, Is this Norfolk?" he asked a young seaman.

"Yup," the sailor said, paying no mind as to why an owl was talking to him, and he kept on walking.

"Daniel," Danny called. He waited for a response. Nothing. No reply. He called again and again and still nothing. In fact, he waited three days and three nights and still nothing. He was getting a little angry because he was very hungry.

Finally, though, his patience won out and he heard Daniel calling him. "Danny, you've done very well so far."

"So how am I going to get to Africa from here? I don't know the way and the ocean is very, very large."

"Well, you don't have to fly. You will go by ship."

"Oh," Danny thought. "Good idea." He thought some more. "Which one?"

"Well, the one we've selected isn't much to look at. And it isn't the fastest. But it has a wise ol' seaman as its captain. His name is Walter. He will be great company for you, and he will teach you many things you need to know. He will teach you who I am so you will understand the role I have to play in this mission," Daniel said. "You are not in this alone, my friend. You are part of a destiny which has been unfolding for a very long time. You just happened to be in the right place at the right time."

"Like the night the twig put my eye out." Danny said.

"You got it," the voice said.

"Who else is involved besides you and Captain Walter?" Danny asked.

"You're the curious one," Daniel said.

"Just want to know what I'm in for," Danny said.

"Be careful you don't ask too much, Daniel warned. "But since you asked, when you get to Africa you are to look for an extraordinary young lion named Mobutu. Then together you will execute your mission.

Enough," the voice said gruffly, and he fell silent.

"No good by or anything. Danny grumbled. "He could have told me where to find Captain Walter or at least something to eat."

For three more days he tried everything. He couldn't get any information because nobody would talk to an owl. But then that third afternoon a grubby old tramp steamer made its way into port. Danny had a hunch that that was the one.

He flew down to wait for the ship to dock. It certainly didn't look like much. In fact, it looked pretty ugly, all battered up and all. Bertha II was her name.

Danny waited for a young seaman to come down the gang plank.

"Pardon me sir," he said. "Is your ship's captain named Walter?"

"Yes, he is," the sailor said, puzzled why an owl was talking to him. So Danny flew closer to the ship and waited for the captain to come out.

"Pardon me, Mr. Captain, Sir. Are you Captain Walter?"

"I am." the captain said, not at all disturbed that an owl was talking to him. Captain Walter had a full snow-white beard, just as Danny had pictured.

"Who are you and what can I do for you?" the captain asked.

"I am Danny. Daniel sent me to you. Can you take me to Africa?"

"Who's Daniel?" the captain asked.

"Welllll.....I don't know exactly," Danny said, embarrassed to tell the captain he heard voices.

The captain seemed satisfied with that for the moment. "Well," he thought, "We do stop on the Ivory Coast of Africa next spring. But we are headed north to Halifax in Nova Scotia and then Copenhagen in Denmark, to pick up some furniture, then to Liverpool in England. Then we will stop at the Ivory Coast of Africa before heading round to the Indian Ocean. But you should be able to find another ship going there more directly.

"But you're the one Daniel sent me to," Danny said.

"Who's Daniel?" the captain persisted.

This time Danny said nothing.

"Well, you can come along if you want." the captain said. "You'll find plenty of mice to eat on this old ship.

"But I don't eat mice," Danny protested. He had long since lost his appetite for the little creatures.

"You don't eat mice!" the captain exclaimed. And Danny told the story of losing his eye and the farmer who fed him corn and potatoes.

Captain Walter ordered the steward to give him fresh corn and potatoes every day.

The next day they set out, heading for Halifax.

## MOBUTU THE LION

Mobutu was a problem and a delight from his earliest days in the pride<sup>1</sup> When very young, he was very playful and mischievous, much to the frustration of his mother Sala. The other mothers were always complaining to Sala that Mobutu was getting their children in trouble. He would always run races with the other cubs and always win. That was innocent enough, but when he would tease the other cubs into jumping higher and higher from the trees -- that was of concern.

Though he was always friendly and made everybody laugh, they didn't know what to do with Mobutu. He was always causing trouble somehow. But then again they didn't know what to do without him.

He was different somehow. The others both liked the difference and feared it. He ran faster than the other lions. He was more agile, leaping from trees. But then there was the question of diet. Mobutu didn't like to eat meat for some reason and he was often seen eating grass on the savannah. He didn't know why he did this; he just knew he didn't like eating meat. He was ashamed that he didn't like meat because he

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<sup>1</sup> A pride is a large family of lions.

thought, "What's a lion if he doesn't eat meat?" And that's exactly what Mwangi said, the big daddy lion of the pride when he found out.

So Mwangi called Mobutu in one day for a little talk. "Mobutu," said Mwangi, "what's this about not eating meat?"

No answer. Mobutu didn't know why he was this way. He just knew he didn't like the taste of meat.

"You've got quite a reputation, young lion," Mwangi said. "What do you have to say for yourself?"

Again no answer.

"Well, Mobutu, I'll give you one week to change your ways, and if you don't, you'll have to leave our pride.

"Yes, sir," Mobutu said and went away with his tail between his legs.

"What shall I do?" he thought. I don't want to leave my friends, but on the other hand, I know I can't eat meat."

Mobutu sat moping all week. He wouldn't go out for the hunt. He wouldn't eat the meat his mother put in front of him. But he wouldn't eat grass either. He ate nothing. His mother tried to talk reason into him, but to no avail.

So the week was up and Mwangi summoned him. "What's your decision?" the older lion asked him.

"I guess I have to leave," Mobutu said timidly.

"Don't be too sad, Mobutu," Mwangi said, for he truly liked the kid. "It's about time for you to leave anyway. But if you don't eat meat you won't survive. And you'll hardly be a lion.

"I'll make out OK; you'll see," said Mobutu. And he went back to say farewell to his friends and his mother. And slowly he walked out of the pride and headed north a good distance to the far end of the Savannah. For two weeks he sat in a tree dejected and wouldn't eat anything.

"What kind of lion am I?" he asked himself. And he thought for a very long time. He didn't understand why he was different. He thought he would die.

## MOBUTU'S NEW FRIENDS

A year passed and Mobutu was making out quite well on his own. But still he was quite an unusual lion, even more unusual than ever.

"Hello there," Mobutu said with a Snoopy grin on his face to the gazelles he was running beside. The lead gazelle shrieked and warned the others. They changed their course, but Mobutu stayed with them.

"I'm friendly," he shouted, but they paid him no mind.

"Just a trick," one of the gazelles said.

"Whoever saw a lion run so fast?" another remarked.

"Yeah, lions can't run as fast as we can," still another gazelle said.

"This one can. ... Why doesn't he strike?"

"Well, he says he's friendly."

"Just a trick," an elder one said. And that was the final word for the day.

Mobutu was losing his enthusiasm. He had been trying to be friendly to the gazelles, the giraffes, the zebras, and the impala in his neighborhood, but they just wouldn't trust him.

Whoever heard of a gazelle, a giraffe, a zebra, or an impala trusting a lion? They would end up as his dinner. But there certainly was lots of gossip about this crazy lion who could run as fast as a gazelle.

"How can he do that?" they all wondered.

"He eats grass down by the river," observed one.

"EATS GRASS!" they all exclaimed.

"Yes, he eats grass!" one of the giraffes said with assurance.

"Well, he is sleek and not as heavy as the others who eat meat. Maybe that's why he can run so fast."

One day Mobutu singled out the lead gazelle for conversation, hoping to make himself understood.

"Hello, my name is Mobutu," he said.

"What do you want?" the gazelle said, refusing to be friendly. "I admire the gazelles, and giraffes and zebras and impala and I just want to be friends."

"How can we trust a lion?" the gazelle said and refused to discuss the matter further.

Mobutu pulled back and slowed down to a slow walk. He was so different nobody would accept him. And he felt very sad.

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One day he was eating grass down in the wetlands. All of a sudden he heard a shrill cry. He went to investigate and he saw an alligator biting

the leg of a young gazelle who had gone there for a drink. He battled the gator and freed the gazelle who had gone, who ran away once it was free.

Well, from that day things were different.

"I'm Kagale" the lead gazelle said. "Thanks for rescuing our little Damali."

"I'm Muga."

"I'm Bamundo," another chimed in.

"I guess you really are our friend."

George slowed down the herd and circled Mobutu. After the long, long time he had been trying, they were finally friends.

Mobutu was very happy in his new role. Because of him, the animals were more friendly toward one another and they began to respect and love Mobutu very much. What a strange and wonderful happening was occurring in the animal kingdom!

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One day two young lions came to see him. They said Nebu, King of the Lions, wanted to see him. So they escorted him to the king's den.

"How are you doing, young Mobutu?" King Nebu asked.

"I am doing very well, thank you," said Mobutu.

"I get reports of your strange activities."

Mobutu thought he was in for it.

"Why do you eat grass?" Nebu asked, peering at him rather inquisitively.

"Because I don't like to eat meat," Mobutu replied.

"Well, I must say you look OK to me. You're lean, all right, but I guess that helps you run faster."

"Yes. Correct," Mobutu said.

"It's about your running that I have brought you here to ask about, Mobutu. . . . How is it you run so fast?" King Nebu leaned his body closer to Mobutu, intent upon his reply.

"I don't know," Mobutu replied. "I really don't know. Apparently I was born this way."

"I see," said the king and lowered his eyebrows this time. "Can you teach other young lions to run fast?"

"Welll. . . ." Mobutu thought a long moment as he scratched his head with his paw. He really didn't want to teach them because they'd only use it in the hunt and they already had enough meat to eat. "Well," said Mobutu, "I don't think it can be taught; it is a *gift*."

"Oh," said King Nebu. "Well, anyway, I am appointing you as member of my council. You have a *gift* we want to know about."

And so Mobutu returned to his territory, happy he was honored by King Nebu and relieved nothing dreadful happened. He just "lazed" around in the sun for days, very pleased with himself.

## Danny's High Seas Adventure

They had just left the port of Halifax and were headed up and across the North Atlantic to Denmark. Danny and Captain Walter had grown rather fond of each other, meeting for a conversation about something or other every day.

"About Daniel," the captain asked. "Who is he?"

This time Danny was willing to talk about his inner voice. "He's a voice I hear inside me that said I had a special mission and must go to Africa to meet someone."

"Sounds like Daniel the prophet," Walter responded.

"A prophet?" Yes, he lived many thousands of years ago. He was a *prophet* -- a messenger of God to his people when they were in exile from the land of Israel."

"Tell me about him," said Danny, as he smoothed his feathers and sat up straight.

"Well, for one thing, he was a vegetarian just like you, Danny."

"A vegetarian?"

"Yes, he<sup>1</sup> would not eat meat from King Nebuchadnezzar's table, but he and his three companions ate vegetables instead. And they were as healthy as the finest of the king's young men and women.

"Mmmm." said Danny. "Tell me more."

"Daniel was also very wise," the captain said. "The king put him and his companions into his service. In any question of wisdom or prudence which the king put before them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters in his kingdom."

"Further, Daniel was very good at interpreting the king's dreams and visions.<sup>2</sup> Nebuchadnezzar's son Belshazzar saw a vision of some writing on the wall written by an invisible hand.<sup>3</sup> Daniel interpreted the writing, telling the king God was going to put an end to his kingdom."

"Then there was the time when Daniel was cast into the lion's den because he was caught praying when all were forbidden to do so.<sup>4</sup> The next day the king went to the den to see if Daniel was still alive. And he was! Unharmful! Daniel said, 'My God has sent his angel to close the mouths of lions so that they have not hurt me. For I have been found innocent before him.'"

"A lion's den!" Danny exclaimed. And he told Captain Walter he was going to Africa to meet a lion. These stories made great sense to Danny as he realized this was not his mission, but Daniel the prophet's. He prayed he would be able to accomplish whatever Daniel told him.

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel 1:8-20.

<sup>2</sup> Daniel 2:31-45.

<sup>3</sup> Daniel 5: 1-28.

<sup>4</sup> Daniel 6: 1-28.

It was very cold crossing the North Atlantic, and some mornings Walter would see Danny covered with ice and snow, but he did not budge from his perch upon the radar antenna.

As they were coming south out of Denmark an extraordinary thing happened. Walter was all excited. "Look, Danny!" Ahead of the ship were three whales and two on either side, as if they were a motorcycle escort.

"That's for you, Danny." The whales stayed with Bertha II for three days and three nights. Danny flew out to greet the whales much to their delight. There was much spouting and jumping and tail flipping. And on the last day as they said farewell, they put on such a display of spouting and dancing with their tails that Walter reported he had never seen the like before. And so it was on to Liverpool and then south to the Ivory Coast of Africa.

During their last days before their arrival on the African coast, Walter and Danny could be seen in deep thought and conversation by the other crew members. When they docked Danny and Walter had an emotional farewell.

"I am grateful, Captain Walter," Danny said, and flew down to the captain's shoulder.

Walter picked up the owl to stroke his feathers, "It was my pleasure, indeed," Walter countered. God be with you, Danny. Listen carefully to the voice of Daniel. Then Walter pressed the young owl to his chest.

Danny let out a little hoot. "I will," said Danny. "Thank you for teaching me about my inner voice. If it wasn't for you, I may have never learned about Daniel the prophet."

And so Danny and Walter parted. Danny flew to the edge of the harbor and once again waited for further instructions as Bertha II continued on her voyage to the Indian Ocean.

"What next, Daniel?" Danny asked.

And without making him wait or further testing, the voice of Daniel said, "Fly eastward, Danny. Fly to the Serengeti Plain. You have done very well and are now prepared for your mission."

## A Story of a Friendship

"Is this it?" Danny asked Daniel.

"This is it," the voice said, as the little owl looked over a portion of the Serengetti Plain. On the way, Danny was told that it is in reality a park set aside from hunting by humans. It is like a huge game preserve. Danny looked over the vast plain. There was nothing but grass and dried-up mud for it was the dry season on the plain. There were a few trees with twisted branches, some filled with herons and egrets. Danny decided to make his home in one of these trees as its sole resident.

"So, whom am I supposed to meet?" Danny inquired.

"You will know soon enough," Daniel said within.

After a brief rest, he was eager to fly around the plain surveying all the lions in search of the one who was his contact and who would be his partner in Daniel's mission.

One day he spied Mobutu by the river munching away at some grass. "A lion eating grass," he thought. "Mmmm, that must be the one."

"Hi, I'm Danny," the owl said.

"Hi," the lion said, distracted from his lunch.

"I am pleased to meet you," Danny said.

"I'm Mobutu," the lion said. "The pleasure's mine. He could tell there was something special about this owl.

"You from around these parts?" asked Mobutu.

"No, I'm from America."

"From AMERICA?" Mobutu asked, surprised.

"Isn't that a long way from here?"

"A very long way," Danny said.

"So why are you here?" Mobutu asked.

"Has something to do with you, but I'm not quite sure what," Danny explained.

In the next few days, Mobutu and Danny spent a lot of time talking. The owl told about his eye being put out, how he had become the only vegetarian owl in the whole wide world, how he listened to the voice of Daniel inside him telling him he had a special mission, and finally about his voyage to Africa and the whales and Captain Walter. He also trusted his new enough to tell Mobutu about Daniel the prophet, about the lion's den and about interpreting dreams and all.

The lion, in turn, told his story, about not liking meat and becoming probably the only vegetarian lion in the whole wide world, about making friends with the gazelles, the giraffes, the impala, and the zebras who also made their home on the Plain.

"Well, we're a lot alike, you and I," Mobutu said.

"Isn't that amazing!" said Danny, as he realized how well he had been guided by the voice of Daniel.

"So am I a part of your mission?" Mobutu asked.

"Well, I guess so," not knowing exactly what the mission was. "I guess we have to await further instructions, Danny said wisely, as much to himself as to the friendly young lion.

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And so they waited for the next appearance of Daniel. In the meantime, they became good friends, talking the long afternoons, with Mobutu sprawled out lazily in the sun while Danny sat on a nearby rock. Sometimes he and Mobutu would sit beside each other in A nearby tree,<sup>5</sup> "for he was agile enough to do this.

"I admire you for your courage, Mo," Danny said to Mobutu, not able to resist the American fondness for shortening names. "You have dared to be who you are and make friends of the other animals, instead of eating them."

"The other lions think courage is being ferocious and roaring loudly and eating big chunks of fresh red meat." Mobutu mused.

"But you have made the word courage mean 'being different' and 'being kind,'" Danny said

"I admire you," Mo said to Danny, "because you have come to understand many things."

"Owls are no wiser than other birds," Danny interjected.

"Well you are a very wise owl, I don't care what you say. You are wiser because you listen to that voice within you and are willing to

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<sup>5</sup>The lion and the owl in the tree would be a great cover illustration.

believe in it with all your heart. Your suffering has made you wise through your willingness to wait for the answer to the question "Why?"

"Well," said Danny. "I wonder what our mission is?"

"We'll see soon enough," said Mo, wisely.

"I guess I'll have to follow Daniel into the lion's den," said Danny. courageously, and sure enough, his musing would prove to be right.

A few months passed and Mo introduced Danny around the territory. They were talked about everywhere. "The odd couple," they were called.

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Late in the fall, two young lions came to visit Mo and said King Nebu had called a council meeting and he was to attend. Mo left with the king's couriers the next morning. When he arrived in the pride he found King Nebu obviously tired and drawn.

"I haven't slept for nights," he said. "I had a dream that disturbed me."

There was silence in the council. No one spoke.

"Can anyone interpret dreams?" Nebu inquired.

Again there was a silence after some initial murmuring. Mo lifted his head from his paws and opened his eyes wide, raising his bushy eyebrows. He said nothing, however, but waited for the king to say more. The king was looking straight at him. "I had this dream about a lion eating hay like an ox." he said.

More murmuring, as if in a court room. All eyes were on Mo now. He swatted a fly away from his face with a paw, trying to look as cool and

collected as he could. He looked around and then said to King Nebu, "I know someone who can interpret dreams."

"Is it you, Mobutu?" the king asked.

"No, not I. A friend of mine. An owl named Danny."

Now Nebu had heard that owls were especially wise, so he was very, very interested.

"I think he can do the job," Mo said, knowing that this was the moment they had been waiting for. Danny's special mission was to interpret the king's dream.

"Shall I ask Danny to come?" Mo asked.

The king thought a moment and said, "Go and ask the owl if he will come. We'll reconvene tomorrow at the same time.

The king's revelation shook everyone. And no one knew what to say, so they left in silence. Mo was smiling inwardly for he alone knew what was happening and enjoyed the moment immensely; but he, too, left in silence.

## King Nebu's Dream

The next day, Mo was back with Danny and this time they sat in a tree above the council area. Mo sat so close to Danny that his mane tickled the owl so much that Danny said "Stop that!"

When King Nebu arrived, there was instant silence. He welcomed Danny rather solemnly.

"I heard of the wisdom of owls and I hear you can interpret dreams," Nebu said.

Danny thought for a moment because this was a sticky one. It wasn't *he* exactly who interpreted dreams. In fact, he had never interpreted a dream before.

"Daniel" he said to himself, "what should I say?" He wasn't even sure Daniel was there but, sure enough, he heard Daniel's voice within, "Don't worry, my young friend. I'll tell you what to say."

So Danny got the courage up and said, "I will interpret your dream for you, to the extent I am given the power to do so. My wisdom is not my wisdom. It comes from inside. It would be a great honor and privilege to interpret your dream for you, King Nebu."

All eyes were on Danny, looking quizzically yet tenderly at him. An owl in a lion's den was certainly a wonder to behold, and it seemed they were *all* aware of that thought at the same time. Danny winked. Mo blushed a lion's blush.

"Tell us your dream, King Nebu," one of the elder lions said.

King Nebu got up, walked back and forth nervously in the den, (the dream obviously made him uncomfortable) and sat down again. "I saw a wolf as a guest of the lamb,"<sup>6</sup> he began.

"A wolf!" someone said.

"And a lamb," another said.

"Quiet please," an elder lion said.

"I saw a leopard lay sleeping with a kid goat." This was very hard for King Nebu because the dream went against everything he was taught.

"I saw a calf and a young lion browsing together in a meadow with a little child playing with them." King Nebu looked nervously at Mo.

"I saw cows and bears as neighbors with the calves and cubs in the same pen."

"And....and....and I saw a lion eating hay like an ox."

They were all a little disturbed now. Eating hay was not something they were interested in, even if they had accepted Mo's eating river grass.

"And," King Nebu said, "I saw a baby playing in a cobras den and a child putting a hand on an adder's lair."

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<sup>6</sup> Isaiah 11:6-9.

They were all stunned. Mo and Danny had some personal understanding of the dream as they were both vegetarian -- not because they wanted to be -- but by some inner guidance. Mo looked at Danny and the owl winked again. All eyes were on Danny now. There was silence as Danny waited for Daniel the prophet to tell him what to say.

"You are very privileged, O great King," Danny began, "because a great event is about to be fulfilled in your sight. All of us are privileged to take part in an event of great import in animal history. Human history, too."

"You must call a council of all the animals of the Plain," Danny concluded.

"A council?" King Nebu asked.

"Yes, a council. Just like this one, except with all the animals present, great and small, including the field mice."

"Even the hippos and the alligators?" a young lion asked.

"Well, they can come if they behave," Danny said. And that's the point: The council is to be one full day, beginning in the afternoon of one day and lasting until the next afternoon -- free of killing. We're to be friends and neighbors for one day."

"They'll never come," a crotchety old lion said. And King Nebu's nephew Segundo growled ferociously at Danny. Danny moved closer to Mo.

Mo was concerned about Segundo's display of anger, but he tried to be positive, "Well, Danny, and I can be ambassadors," the young lion said. "We've made many friends already," suddenly realizing his role in all this. For one great and affirming moment he understood the way he was. It all

made sense. He, like Danny, had been prepared for this by some kind of *silent voice* or intuition so that he knew what he should do even when it made him different from everybody else.

The council area had become like a tennis match. One moment all eyes were on Danny, then on the king.

"What does my council have to say?" he asked. It took a while for them to have the courage to speak.

"I think it's impossible and preposterous," a crotchety lion said.

"Whoever heard of lions not going out on the hunt?" a young lion asked of no one in particular.

"It *would* be nice to see all the children together. I liked that part of the dream," one of the female lions said.

"I've watched Mobutu grow up and be so strange to us. Now I understand why he eats grass," said an uncle to Mo. Segundo growled again.

"What do you have to say, Mobutu?" the King asked.

"Well, the dream helps me understand a lot of things," Mo said. "Let's try it."

"Besides, it's not we who are doing it," Danny affirmed. This is something greater than us all. Even the whales know about this day." And he told the story of his whale escort on the way to Africa.

"Well, we'll give it a try," decided King Nebu.

Again there was a long silence. "When shall this day be?" Nebu asked, peering at Danny.

Danny was caught by surprise. "When shall this day be?" he first asked himself, then the voice within. No reply.

"That seems to be a matter not to be decided at this time," Danny observed, summoning up all the wisdom he could. It will be decided by persons far greater than us. Your dream, O King, is very old. It is the dream of many people of good will and first appeared in human Scriptures. We will know when the time is right.

"Very well," King Nebu said. "Council is adjourned."

### **Conflict on the Plain**

Mo and Danny were appointed ambassadors to the animals by King Nebu. They went far and wide to tell the story of the king's dream. They went first to Kagale, the leader of the gazelle. Kagale listened with interest and pledged his support, promising the gazelles would be there.

"When will it be?" Kagale inquired.

"We don't yet know the time. But that will be revealed to us all. We will know," Mo said.

"Very well," Kagale said.

"Will you spread the word to the other animals who are your friends and neighbors?" Danny asked.

"Certainly will," the gazelle said.

"That's great!" Mo and Danny exclaimed together.

So Mo told the impala, the giraffes, the zebras and the elephants while Danny flew off to find the owls and the other birds and the monkeys.

"Shall we let the humans in on our secret?" Mo wondered.

"Certainly," Danny said. It was really the inner Daniel speaking.

"But can they be trusted?" Mo asked.

"Some of them can," Danny responded. "Besides, isn't the Serengetti Plain protected from the humans?"

So they made their way into a neighboring village, causing quite a scurry, with the children running to their parents. They talked to the chief.

"Hi, I'm Danny.

"And I'm Mobutu."

"What can I do for you, the chief said. "My name is Nyambo," not at all dismayed or bewildered as to why an owl and a lion were talking.

"We come here to get your help in a great event that is going to happen on the Serengetti Plain, Danny explained.

"Yes, we came here to invite your tribe to join us," Mo added.

Then the two told the story of how Danny had come from America, about Daniel, and about King Nebu's dream and his decision to call a council of the animals.

"I have heard of Daniel the prophet," the chief said. That seemed to be a selling point for the whole idea.

"Very well. I will spread the word to the tribe. You can count on our support.

"Thanks," Danny and Mo said in unison. "We'll be back to talk with you later to see what kind of support you get," Mo added.

Meanwhile, back on the Plain, Segundo and his cronies were trying to make Danny and Mo's job very difficult and dangerous. The older lion

enlisted some of the younger lions in a campaign to destroy Danny and Mo's mission.

"I have called you young folks here for a mission of our own," Segundo said. "I want to sabotage this Council idea. It's preposterous."

"Yeah, I agree, Karume said. That owl has got to go."

"We have to plan this thing very carefully," Segundo said, leaning toward the others and speaking secretively. "Karume, and Kimini, you go out and scout what that owl and Mobutu are up to.

"Yes sir," he said. "When shall we report?"

"Two days from now." Segundo said.

After the pair left, Segundo and the others talked about making attacks on the gazelles, the impala and giraffes.

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When Karume and Kimini returned, they reported seeing Mobutu and Danny talking with the gazelles and the impala.

"They seemed to be drumming up quite a bit of support," Kimini said.

"Mmm," Segundo murmured. "Not good. We've got to stop them. Here's my plan...."

The next day the six of them made raids on the gazelles and the impala. They killed quite a few animals, and succeeded in striking fear into all the animals on the Plain. Many who had promised Mo and Danny support were pulling back now. Danny and Mo had to constantly repair the harm done by Segundo.

"I am so sorry that this has happened to you," Mo said to Kagale, the lead gazelle.

"Everyone is afraid now," Kagale said. "I am sorry but I have been instructed to cancel our plan to attend the Great Council."

"We have to expect that any great plan is going to meet opposition. The fight should make us all the more determined," Mo said.

"I suppose you're right, Mo," Kagale said. It does sound so promising. I will try to keep my troops together."

"Thanks," Danny said.

The pair were weary and frustrated after weeks of trying to convince the animals of the plain to hang in, but they kept on going. One day, they would be successful; the next, Segundo and his crew had unraveled their efforts. Nevertheless, they conducted many talks among the animals on the plain.

Little did they know that Danny, too, would be in danger.

"Segundo, I know how we can kill this thing for good," Kimini said.

"How's that?"

"Let's kill the owl," Kimini suggested.

"How are we going to do that?" one of the others asked. He can fly up to a tree beyond our reach.

"Yeah, but I have observed him perched on a rock, talking to Mobutu. We could sneak up behind the rock and pounce on him before he sees us.

"But what about Mobutu?"

"He won't see us behind the rock."

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The next day Kimini and Karume crept through the grass among the trees to the place where Mo and Danny were talking. They stalked the owl ever so silently, inch by inch.

They waited and waited for the right moment. Then they leapt upon the rock and pounced on Danny. But the owl was a little bit quicker. He escaped and flew overhead. The only piece of evidence that the lion had for his attack was a mouthful of tail feathers.

Mo lunged for the other lion and a fight began. Karume sat ready to pounce at Kimini's signal. Kimini and Mo tore into each other's backs with their claws. In a clinch, they rolled off the rock and hit the ground with a great thump. Danny circled over head screeching and hooting.

Mo wounded the hind quarters of the other lion and Kimini winced in pain. Even though he was a hundred pounds heavier than Mo, Mo was quicker. Kimini limped away with his tail between his legs and Mo let him go.

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"Did you succeed?" Segundo asked the wounded lion.

Kimini growled.

"So now what do we do?"

"I don't know." Kimini said, embarrassed that he didn't even land a helpless owl.

From that day forward, Mo and Danny had less problems. They worked tirelessly to keep the other animals on track and soon their work

as ambassadors was finally done. And the council was, once again, the talk of the Serengetti Plain.

## **The Great Council of the Animals**

The great day finally came. And the animals, in some unexplainable fashion knew this was the day. They gathered in a great grassy part of the plain. The lions gathered first but left room for two of each of the animals to be represented in the council circle.

It was afternoon and the sun had begun to set, just as Danny had foretold. They came orderly. And animals who were natural enemies had no fear of one another. Even the birds and the mice were unafraid. The two mice sat defiantly next to the elephants. All of them were being honored in this great gathering and they knew it. Nothing could deprive them of it.

Mo and Danny were the focus of this council. They sat side by side in a great tree and below them was an empty place, a place of honor. King Nebu sat to the right and no as yet sat to the left. Danny had reserved that place to represent Daniel in his invisible presence.

The sun set with tufts of pink clouds rank upon rank across the sky. "Snow clouds?" one of the human observers remarked.

And all sat still, and waited. The whole plain was cast into a peaceful quiet. Only the various animal murmurings could be heard, but even these were extraordinarily subdued. The whole animal population seemed to be thoughtfully waiting for the special moment. Most of them were in awe of this extraordinary gift that had been given to them. And a human observer compared it to the first Christmas eve when the animals, beside the humans, paid homage to the newborn child. And indeed it was the night: Christmas Eve on the Serengeti Plain.

The stars were out now all over the sky between the thin strands of clouds. The moon came out and animals could be seen as far as the eye could see. They were soaking up the meaning of this extraordinary moment in the history of the world. All were simply reduced to silence before its wonder.

Near midnight, Danny gave a little hoot and then winked at King Nebu. It was Nebu's honor to introduce the program for the evening.

Nebu began, "My sister and brother animals: This is truly a special night."

"A holy night," one of the human observers whispered.

"We have gathered here at the invitation of some one we do not know but who knows and loves us all. It is a result, a fulfillment, of an age-old dream." the king continued. And he told his dream as it occurred. They all listened, and realized that they were experiencing the fulfillment of that dream.

"The wolf shall be the guest of the lamb."

"The calf and the young lion shall browse together."

"Together their young shall rest."

"And a little child shall guide them."

"And now there is someone present who will interpret the dream. He has come to us from America, and it is he who has directed that this council be held. He is the owl Danny.

Danny flew over to a bare tree stump where everybody could see him.

"My sisters and brothers," Danny began. "A great, great dream foretold in human scriptures is fulfilled in our sight this night. We are witnesses and participants in a great moment in the history of our planet. We are a living testimony that a new kind of living together on our planet is possible. We are living testimony that peace is possible. Tomorrow we will go back to our old ways, perhaps, but do not forget that you have learned this night that peace is possible."

"The place of honor you see before you has been reserved for the One whose birthday this is and who has made all this possible. His name is Jesus and he is the King at whose council we sit. Even though you do not see him, he is certainly near us. It is his presence that is the special feeling we feel. So let us live in peace, my brothers and sisters, as best we can and let us never forget this night."

In response, the animal's voices blended together in a special animal song.

"A lullaby," one of the humans said. And truly it was a beautiful lullaby, the animals' own Christmas carol and the animals' way of affirming what Danny and Nebu had said.

Then they all slept. They slept together on this great plain. And in the morning there were two inches of snow upon them.

"A blanket of blessing," a human observed.

Snow was unheard of in these parts. It was truly beautiful. Everyone awoke, rather sleepily. During the night, they had all moved quite near to one another, enjoying the closeness of this extraordinary touch.

A bunch of field mice came to Mo in the early morning light. "Can we have a ride, sir?" the leader asked.

Mo shook his head in a flurry of snow flakes. "Sure!" he said, rather pleased with the idea. "Climb on up!"

The field mice climbed up and Mo stood up. "Hang on tight," he said, as he shook the remaining snow off him.

The field mice chattered with delight, enjoying the soft and silky feel of his beautiful mane. Mo darted here and there among the animals, and when he was out in the open field again, opened up into a fast gallop.

When they arrived back in the center of activity, the field mice climbed down and said "Thank you very much, sir, and chattered their way excitedly off to the foot of a nearby tree. Mo noticed that there was now a long line of young folks also waiting for a ride. The field mice in their boldness had given courage to lots of the other young folk.

Mo looked around to his cousins and said, "I'll think I'll need some help with this or I'll be here till next Christmas!" The other young lions soon were darting too and fro to the delight of riders and spectators alike.

Then one of the lions got an idea from this. He had often wondered what it was like to ride high up in the air on the back of an elephant. So

Jojo, a distant cousin to Mo, mustered his courage and approached a nearby elephant. "Mr. Elephant," he said, "could I have a ride, too?"

The elephant looked at him quizzically, flapped his ears and said, "Well, all right. But be sure you don't scratch me." The elephant picked him up in his trunk and placed him on his back. They pranced about rather regally and all the animals cheered and cheered.

By noon, with the sun high up in the beautiful clear sky, the animals began to leave in family groups. They wondered what was in store for them after this great event.

The mood of the event lingered for weeks and Mo and Danny were welcome wherever they went for now they were understood. And the lion and the owl grew with even more courage and even more wisdom in their new roles. For now they understood that they were ambassadors, not of King Nebu, but of the Prince of Peace. They were filled with joy. Now that they realized why their lives were so different and even painful at times. They had been guided all along -- long before they realized it. The suffering and hardship that Danny endured seemed such a small price in the face of such joy.

## Danny's Return

And the day finally came for Danny to leave. He heard Daniel's voice summoning him back to America to carry the news of this great event to the animals of that continent.

"Danny, I will never forget what you have brought to us," Mo said with tears in his eyes, trying somehow to say good bye.

"Thank you, Mo," Danny said. "You have been a wonderful friend. I will never forget you."

"Thank you for bringing me wisdom," the courageous lion said.

"Thank you for bringing me courage," the wise owl said. "The lion's den is not so fearful after all."

The lion drew Danny between his paws and the fur under his chin and gave Danny a tender farewell hug. There were tears in the eyes of both of them.

And with that Danny flew off to the west toward America and another rendezvous with a ship. And I'm sure he had a hunch he would be greeted by the whales. But a twenty-one whale salute and escort into New York harbor -- who would believe? But the event is recorded in *The*

*New York Times*. Such a display of spouting and tail flipping had never been seen before. "An act of prophecy," the *Times* reported.

Word spread also among the animals on the planet of the great event on Christmas Eve on the Serengeti Plain. Thus the whole order of the animal kingdom became aware of the changes decreed for our planet by the Lord Jesus, while humans continued to plays with guns and bombs.

Each year at Christmas thereafter until Mo was very old, he told the story of the dream at the council of the animals. For one day each year the animals had peace with one another -- a sign of the new order of things to come on planet earth.

As for Danny, he set up residence in the great tree in which he was born. Animals came from far and wide to talk to this wise old servant of the kingdom of Jesus. In fact, it is said that even some humans came to consult with him.

And the animals, in this story at least, led the way to peace.

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