

Kevin Keeps Up

by Ann Whitehead Nagda



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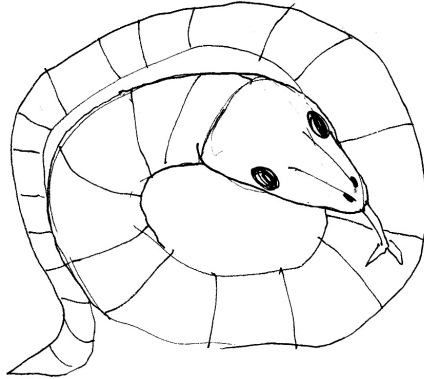
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*To Marilyn Malin,
with thanks
and love*

chapter one



“My snake disappeared,” Kevin announced as he hung up his coat at the back of the classroom.

“Bad news!” said Richard, unzipping his parka.

Jenny looked around nervously. “Is your snake somewhere in our classroom?”

“No,” Kevin replied as he walked toward his desk. “Striker lives in my bedroom, but his cage was empty this morning.” He fell heavily into his seat, which made his chair hit the desk behind him.

“Was that the snake you brought for the Valentine’s Day party?” Jenny asked.

“No, that was Ratty.” Kevin drummed his fingers on the desk.

Richard slid into his seat behind Jenny's. "Maybe Striker will show up when he gets hungry."

"When Ratty escaped, I never found him." Kevin sighed. He still missed Ratty.

Jenny shivered. "Are there a lot of loose snakes around your house?"

"No, but if my mother finds Striker before I do, her screams will be heard all over town." Kevin grimaced. His mother had never been very happy about his pet snakes.

"Scenes from a horror movie." Richard chuckled.

"It's not funny," said Kevin. "If Striker slithers out and scares my mother, I'll never be allowed to keep another snake in the house. Ever."

"Maybe you need a different kind of pet," said Jenny. "Something furry and cuddly."

"I like my pets slithery and scaly," said Kevin.

Jenny shivered again.

"Class, let's get started," said their teacher, Mrs. Steele. "We're going to begin a research project today."

Kevin groaned. He hated research projects. As if losing his snake wasn't enough bad news for one day.

Kevin swiveled in his chair so that he could watch Ruby, the tarantula. She was the class pet and had never escaped. Not yet anyway. This morning Ruby had climbed up the side of her cage using her sticky feet. Tarantulas have these great fangs they use to inject venom into their prey. Their fangs move up and

down, kind of like Susan's hand when she wanted the teacher's attention, which was most of the time. She was doing it now. Richard had his hand up, too, but his arm was moving back and forth like a big wave to somebody far away.

Kevin leaned toward Jenny. "What was the question?"

Jenny frowned, then turned away.

Well, that wasn't very nice. Sometimes Kevin got the feeling that Jenny didn't like him. He was just trying to keep up with the classroom discussion.

Whatever the question was, Richard and Susan sure wanted to answer it. Which one would get called on? And the winner was Susan, otherwise known as Miss Smarty-pants.

"They are covered with hair," said Susan.

"That's right," said Mrs. Steele.

"Tarantulas have hairy legs and abdomens," Kevin said out loud.

Susan turned and gave him a dirty look. What a creep. He'd like to shoot a few tarantula hairs into her eyeball.

"Yes, tarantulas do have some hairs, but they're not mammals, are they?" His teacher stared at him with a pained look. Probably because he hadn't raised his hand. He forgot, okay? But then she said, "There is something else that all mammals do."

Richard's hand was waving again. Mammals could move their arms and hands all over the place.

Mrs. Steele nodded to Richard. She had to call on him before his arm fell off.

“Mammals feed milk to their babies,” he said.

Kevin liked Richard. He was smart, but he wasn’t a show-off like Susan.

“Good,” said Mrs. Steele. “What are the glands called that produce milk for mammal babies?”

“Milk glands,” Kevin said.

Mrs. Steele stared at him. She didn’t say a thing.

Uh-oh. Was that the wrong answer? Or was his teacher unhappy that he hadn’t raised his hand? Sometimes the words just came out of his mouth before he had a chance to even think about raising his hand.

“Kevin,” his teacher said gently. “What’s our class rule that you broke again?”

“Raise your hand,” he muttered.

“Yes. Raise your hand before talking. And your answer is correct. Mammals have milk glands.” Mrs. Steele wrote milk glands on the board.

Well, at least he had the right answer.

“What’s another name for these glands?” Mrs. Steele asked.

He didn’t know the answer to that one. This time only Susan raised her hand. “Mammary glands.”

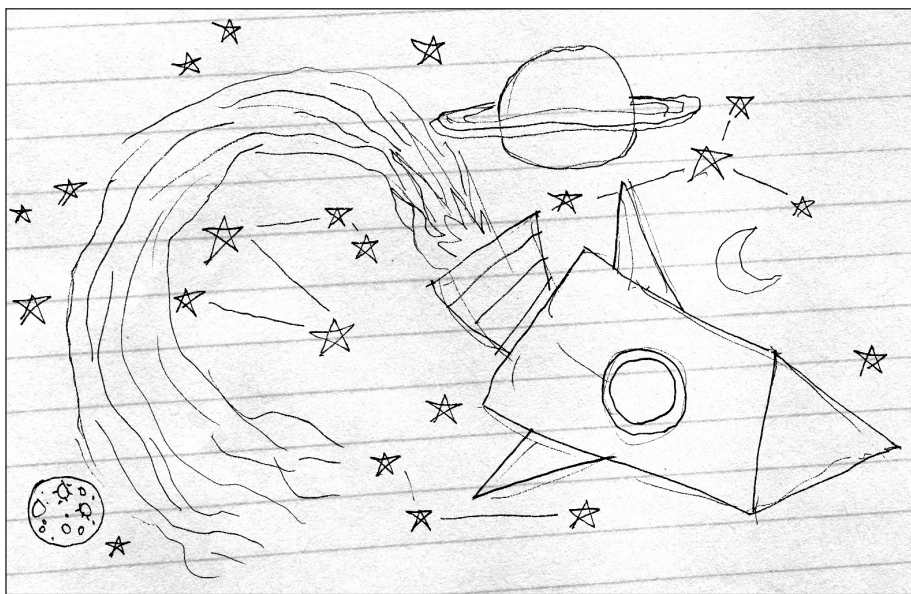
“Yes, only mammals have mammary glands. That’s how these animals got the name *mammal*. Most mammals bear live young, but a few don’t. They lay eggs instead. Can you name an egg-laying mammal?”

Susan had her hand up again, and Mrs. Steele nodded to her.

“A platypus.” Susan had a smug look on her face.

Susan was a walking, talking encyclopedia. Kevin rolled his eyes at Jenny, and she smiled back. Maybe Jenny did like him. A little bit anyway.

“Right. That’s an Australian mammal, isn’t it?” Mrs. Steele began talking about where different mammals lived.



Kevin wished he could go somewhere like Australia and have an adventure. Somewhere really exciting. Right now. If only he had his very own rocket ship and could blast off to the moon and beyond. He picked up his pencil and drew a rocket. It was zooming into

the solar system. Oh no, there was an enemy ship. He fired at it with his laser gun. Now there were more enemy ships coming at him.

“Kevin,” said his teacher, “what African mammal would you like to write about?”

Uh-oh. Did she say African animal? He zoomed his attention back from outer space and stared at the board. Someone had picked a gorilla. Probably Susan. The teacher’s pet gorilla. Gorilla girl.

“What’s your favorite mammal?” asked Mrs. Steele.

Kevin couldn’t think of any favorite mammals. “I really like reptiles. Uh. And big hairy spiders like Ruby. But mammals . . .”

Susan turned and stared at him, frowning and wrinkling her nose. It made her two nostrils look really big, sort of like gorilla nostrils. Guess she didn’t like snakes and spiders.

“Well, think about it some more and let me know later,” said his teacher.

Richard raised his hand. “I’d like to write about wild dogs,” he said.

That made sense. Richard talked about his old dog, Wolf, a lot. He was dog crazy.

Jenny wanted to write about leopards. No wonder. She loved cats. Her cat, Munchkin, was the official school cat. Munchkin often roamed the hallways, visiting a classroom or two. Then he’d take a nap on his special bench in the library.

Why did they have to write about mammals anyway? Kevin would much rather write about snakes.

Suddenly he heard his teacher say something about Africa.

“What was that?” he whispered to Jenny.

She shrugged, but Richard said softly, “She’s going to Africa.”

“This summer?” Kevin whispered.

“Next week!” Richard replied.

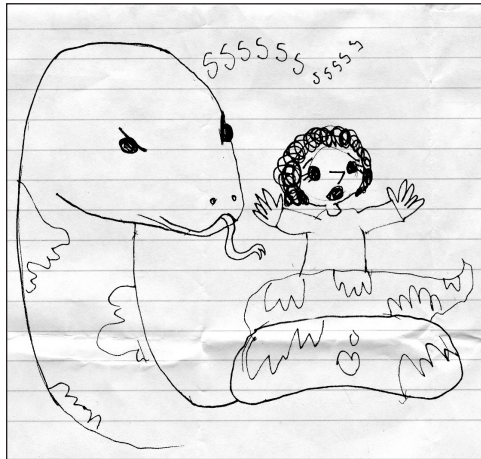
Kevin stared at his teacher. “Are we having a sub?” Oh no! He’d said it in his outside voice. And he’d forgotten to raise his hand. Now his teacher would give him a stern look.

But Mrs. Steele looked at him with kind eyes and said gently, “Mrs. Beezer will be your substitute teacher while I’m gone. She’s excited to help all of you with your animal books.”

Not the Beezer! Beezer the Buzzard! He was dead meat! Kevin put his head down on his desk with a clunk. The Buzzard would move his desk to the front of the room. She’d keep him in during recess. He wouldn’t be able to share a joke with Richard or annoy Susan or anything. How could Mrs. Steele do this to him? How would he survive?

chapter two

After lunch recess it was time for silent reading. Kevin had a book open on his desk. The book had seemed okay in the beginning, but now he was bored with it. He pulled a blank piece of paper from his desk and began to draw the head of an anaconda with its



forked tongue sticking out. The snake smelled a substitute teacher. The teacher had black curly hair like Mrs. Beezer. Kevin grinned as he drew the big snake throwing its coils around her.

Suddenly, all around him, kids opened their desks, took out notebooks and pencils, and lined up by the door. Yikes! He was going to be left behind. Kevin rummaged around in his desk until he found his notebook, then grabbed a pencil and hurried after his classmates. He didn't know where they were headed. Sometimes he felt like a detective trying to solve a mystery. Right now the clues were the notebook, pencil, and no coats. Couldn't be outside for a field trip. Darn. Couldn't be art class either. The art teacher always gave them paper for their projects. Sometimes clay. He liked making monsters out of clay.

Mrs. Steele opened the door to the library. Oh no, not research.

As they entered the library the orderly line of students collapsed into a big bunch. Kevin was barely inside the door.

"Welcome, amigos." Nando, the librarian, walked toward them pushing a cart with books on it. "I've put some books about Africa on this cart. For nonfiction books about animals, you need to look in this section." He led them to some bookshelves. "And some of you might want to start by getting on a computer and using the Internet."

Kevin didn't like using the Internet. There was

just too much confusing stuff. He liked short books with lots of pictures.

“Let me know if you need help,” Nando said. He looked right at Kevin when he said it.

Kevin had noticed Nando’s shiny brown cowboy boots, so he said, “Cool boots.”

“Thanks, amigo.” The librarian winked and then turned to help Richard with something.

Kevin knew he needed help, but not with mammals. He needed help persuading Mrs. Steele to let him write about snakes. But Nando probably wouldn’t be much help with that.

All around him kids were grabbing books from the shelves. Kevin sat on the floor and started reading titles. Camels, Foxes, Giraffes, Gorillas. He looked around for Gorilla Girl, but she had disappeared. Probably on a computer. He pulled a book about gorillas from the shelf and paged through it, looking at the pictures. They sure had huge, funny-looking noses. The big guys looked downright grumpy. Gorilla Girl would fit right in.

“That looks like an interesting book.” Mrs. Steele knelt beside him and pointed at one of the pictures. “My, that’s a handsome-looking silverback. Would you like to write about gorillas, too?”

“No way.” He didn’t want anything to do with Gorilla Girl. Kevin snapped the book shut. “I thought Susan might like to read it.”

Mrs. Steele smiled at him and took the book. “I’ll show it to Susan. That was nice of you to think of her.

I'd like everyone in our class to help each other, so each student can create a great animal book."

Kevin opened his mouth and stared at his teacher. "We have to make real books?"

His teacher nodded. "Oh yes, with text and pictures and at least one graph."

"That sounds like a lot of work!" Kevin had a sick feeling in his stomach.

"Don't worry. You'll be spending several weeks on it."

Kevin moaned.

Mrs. Steele patted his shoulder. "I'll help you get started. Do you think you might be interested in learning about cheetahs? I know a lot about them because my husband is in Africa right now studying cheetahs."

Kevin looked up at her. "Is that why you're going to Africa?"

"Yes, I haven't seen my husband for six weeks," said his teacher.

"That's a long time," said Kevin. "I guess you miss him."

"Yes, I do." Mrs. Steele smiled at him and plucked two cheetah books from the shelf. "Read about cheetahs and see what you think. Take the books home with you tonight so you can decide whether you want to research cheetahs or some other mammal."

Kevin sighed. He was certainly going to miss his teacher. He stood up holding the books and tried to decide what to do next.

Richard sat by a computer. When he saw Kevin, he motioned to him. “Look what I found. I Googled ‘escaped snakes,’ and here’s a whole article about it.” Richard pointed to some words on the screen.

Kevin sat down beside him and studied the screen. “Wow! There are a lot of words. Did you read it?”

“Yeah. It says to sprinkle flour on the floor, and if the snake crawls through it, you’ll be able to tell what room they’re in.”

“You mean sprinkle flour in every room?” Kevin asked.

Richard nodded. “Especially in doorways or near places a snake might hide.”

“My mother will love that!” Kevin rolled his eyes. He sure had a lot to do once he got home. He had to read two books, finish the math work sheet he hadn’t finished in class, and secretly sprinkle flour all over the house.