

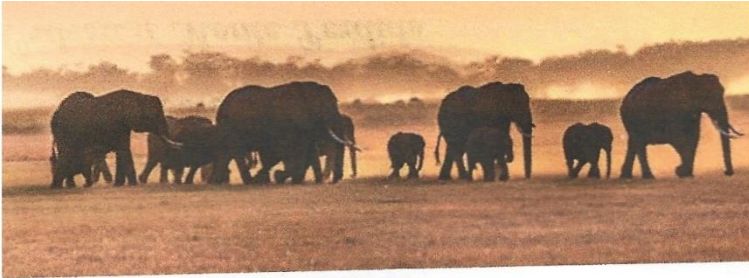
# Inkslingers Blended Session

**17th August 2024**

The Prompt from The Bag Was:

I have a step ladder because my real ladder left when I  
was five.

And the Visual



*African elephants, Amboseli National Park,  
Kenya*

## **Votre Cherie**

**Greg Fields**

After breakfast, Conor traveled with program staff to a refugee camp in Byumba, an hour's drive north of Kigali. They saw people driving their cattle along the roadside, carrying goods to and from the markets in each small village or walking their children to school. The road rose dramatically into the northern hills. Conor noted that, amazingly, even this terraced land was cultivated. Some farms seemed to rise almost vertically up the slopes.

In turning through one of the road's final curves, the camp came into view at once in front of and above them. It spread like a blotch. Almost 15,000 refugees lived here, most of them for years. They had nowhere else to go. They occupied blue and green tents that spread down the sides of the camp in all directions, marked off by flimsy fencing.

Conor took his first steps gingerly along the muddy ground. He whispered to the program director who was part of their group. "Tim, do you notice anything about the people here?"

"Other than the fact that I'd hate to be them?"

"Yeah, but that's not what I mean. You realize there are almost no men here?"

"What did you expect? They're dead or off fighting someone else's war."

There may not have been many men, but there were children everywhere, and as the white men walked through the camp, they drew curious peeks from behind tent flaps or around corners. Some started to follow them, timidly at first and at some distance, but then Conor stopped, turned around, and through gestures asked if he could take their picture. One boy, probably eight or nine, came forward with a broad grin. He gave an exaggerated pose, flexing his tiny arm to show his muscle. Conor laughed out loud then took the picture, after which he pressed his hands together in thanks.

The children clamored around them then, chattering and asking questions in French—What is your name? Where do you come from? Do you have any money? Conor knew little French, but he grabbed their hands and felt them reaching to his back and occasionally hugging him around the waist.

A group of boys broke off when they reached a flat field that had been cleared enough to accommodate a soccer game. One carried a makeshift ball made of rags and twine, but it was quite close in size to a regular ball. They gestured for the two men to join them.

“Come on, Tim. Let’s run with the local talent.”

“You go ahead, Conor. I’m heading back. Don’t be too long.”

Conor shook his head then ran with the boys to the field, and they began to kick the ball around. After a few minutes, they broke off into two roughly equal sides and started a game. Conor sloshed through the mud with them, running the length of the field and back as the game demanded. The boys were quick and fast, accustomed to playing on uneven muddy ground. Conor kept up with them, made some stops, made some passes, and had the ball taken off his foot more than once.

No one had scored yet when Conor broke away, conscious of the time. He gestured that he had to go, then pressed his hands together again in thanks. The boys stopped their game, gathered around him, then one after another gave him a quick hug. Not one of them rose above his shoulders.

As Conor left the field, a crowd of children was standing by. Almost all of them were girls who had been watching the game. Watching the strange new player.

When he walked over to them, one little girl dressed in a green frock grabbed his hand. She was tiny, no more than five or six, and she didn’t smile, even when Conor knelt before her and looked directly into her face. She said nothing and peered at him intently. As they began to walk, she clung fiercely to his hand. They walked back up into the camp that way, joined fast by their hands as the other children jostled around them, taking turns grabbing his other hand or patting his back.

Conor stopped and squatted. Though he knew little French, he could fake the basics, and he asked her, “Comment tu t’appelles?” She stared hard at him and said nothing. “Je m’appelle Conor,” he said. “Je suis Américain.” No response other than the intent stare, a furrowed forehead, and concentrated dark eyes. Other children pressed in on them until Conor squeezed his girl’s hand then stood back up. They continued to walk that way, hand firmly in hand, until they reached the edge of the camp, where the delegation had gathered after completing its official tour.

The country director saw Conor approach. “Jesus, Conor, what did you do—roll around in the mud?”

Conor looked down and saw mud speckling the length of his slacks. His shirt was in disarray and had dirty handprints along the side. His shoes were two indistinguishable mudballs.

“I got caught up with some of the local young people.”

“It looks as if you’ve got a new friend.”

All around him now were smiling and laughing young faces, still chattering at him in words he could not understand, although he could make out these words: “Votre chérie,” they said, pointing at him holding the hand of his new friend—“Your dear one.”

Still, his little girl clung fast to him.

Votre chérie.

It was time to go. Conor squatted down once more and faced the small girl. “I have to go now,” he said in English. There was no other way, but perhaps she could intuit what he was saying. Perhaps she could feel the unexpected heaviness in his heart.

“I have to go,” he said again, and still she did not respond. “But I will remember you always. All the days of my life. Good luck, lass. Bon chance.” Then he stood and turned toward the truck. She released his hand at last, then remained still while Conor walked away to climb into his vehicle, just a few feet away. The truck burped alive, and they prepared to head back down the muddy road out of the camp.

As they did so, Conor turned to look out the window to see his girl, still staring at him, her eyes tightly fixed, still intent, and two large tears running down either cheek.

## Casualty

### Gerard Byrne

Casualty was packed more than usual for a Saturday night. It had been one of the hottest days of the year and several concerts, festivals and shows had been all on at the same time. This had a knock on effect to public transport. This is why it took Dermot so long to get to the hospital that night. He'd had to deal with the drunks on the train, the heroin addicts on the Luas and the hooded thugs on the bus. Pretty much your usual Dublin experience.

Dermot poked his head in behind several white curtains in the casualty area. He'd been told to fuck off twice already by the loved ones of other patients. Thankfully it wasn't long until he found his father Seamus. His old man was lying down on a bed. He looked weak and sweat was still pumping from his body. His clothes were lying on a small metal chair next to him.

"Can you hear me dad?", Dermot moved the clothes off the chair and put them on the floor beside it before sitting down.

Seamus slowly opened his eyes and looked up at the fluorescent light above him, "damn it. I'm still feckin here. Was having this beautiful dream about me, Pamela Anderson and Teri Hatcher. We were sitting in a giant hot tub full of baked beans and we were playing spot the submarine"

"Please dad", Dermot wasn't in the humour for his father's idea of lightening the mood. Ever since Dermot's mother had done a runner six years ago, Seamus had gone downhill. Trying to reclaim his youth. Unfortunately that didn't mean wearing tight fitting clothing and going out every evening on a racing bike. No, Seamus had found another way to try and recapture his youth, "no more jokes. You nearly died. Your heart actually stopped for a few minutes. Do you need any more of a warning than that?"

"I'd rather die doing something I love, than bow out slowly in front of the telly watching endless episodes of only fools and horses", Seamus still hadn't looked his son's way yet. He was waiting for the lecture. It was coming. Only a matter of time.

“Nothing wrong with living life a little”, Dermot noticed a badly bleeding patient passing by their small little alcove, “but going to the Prodigy and dropping an E is not the kind of behaviour a man of your age should be up to. You’re fifty four for god sake”

“I’ve been into the Prodigy since the very start”, Seamus finally looked at his son for the first time, “this could be their last time here in Ireland. No way I was missing out on that”

“But dropping an E dad. You shouldn’t be taking drugs at your age. It’s not good for your heart”

“It wasn’t just ecstasy son. I dropped speed, a few lines of coke, some weed and these little blue tablets that made me feel really weird”

“For the love of god”, Dermot rubbed his forehead roughly, “you can’t even handle drinking two cans of red bull back to back. You said you could feel your heart pumping fast after that. You would have known what speed and coke would have done to you. You could have died”

“I would have died happy”, Seamus rested his head back down on the bed.

“And what’s with the clothes?”, Dermot pointed down at the pile of psychedelic clothing. The T-shirt looked like somebody ran over a clown several times with a steamroller and the jeans had flared legs and large pockets, “they look like the stuff you wore back in the nineties when you first met mam”

“That’s because they are. Found them all on eBay the other day. People used to think that I looked pretty damn handsome when I used to wear them, so I figured that I should try recapturing that image again”

“That’s over thirty years ago dad. You just look like a sad old man in that getup”

“That’s your opinion”, Seamus stared back up at the ceiling, “you’ll never understand”

Suddenly a young woman burst through the opening in the curtains. She couldn’t be much older than twenty five. She wore knee high leather boots, denim hot pants and a boob tube that didn’t cover much of her chest. Her face lit up when she seen Seamus in the bed, “here’s my

man”, she hugged into him and kissed his face all over, “those bastards wouldn’t let me go in the ambulance with you. Nearly got arrested by the guards as well. Thankfully Miriam started a riot and everyone was too busy dealing with all that to notice me slipping away”, she kept on kissing Seamus’s face, “my little Seamy Wayme”

Dermot had stood up while watching all this. The woman was way younger than him and definitely out of his league. So what the hell was she doing with his father?, “aren’t you gonna introduce us dad?”, he really didn’t wanna be introduced but he still had to know what the hell was going on.

Seamus’s smile went from ear to ear, “this is my new girlfriend Chardonnay”

“Girlfriend?”, Chardonnay seemed to be insulted by that comment.

Sorry”, Seamus was worried that he had overstepped the mark, “I just thought that we were getting more serious over the last few days”

“We are”, replied a smiling Chardonnay as she held up her hand to show off a huge engagement ring, “but I can’t believe that you forgot giving me this bad boy tonight”, she planted another kiss on his lips.

Dermot watched his old man sucking face with the glorified prostitute. He couldn’t believe this was happening. He had to do something to break this little love affair up and soon, or there would be no money left in the will when it came to his old man kicking the proverbial bucket.



## **Jacob's mention**

**Bridin Harnett**

You know that I cannot proclaim myself a visionary.

In fact, I cannot in my memory ever recall climbing the rungs of a ladder to the top although perhaps I have previously done so.

Not that I have been a recipient of a vision at the top. After all, I am not Jacob (peace be upon him).

No. Rather on the contrary, I had probably considered the difficulty of descending rung for rung with splintered hands, faltering steps and reticence in the hope that in the descent that I might not fall off a height.

Yes, practical considerations at the top of a ladder.

Yet as such, the following considerations may have imbibed me, based on experiences as I choose to narrate them.

I think that such a conversation might ensue between a man and such a woman as instigated in such elocutionary force. I imagine such a conversation at least in attempts to override the feelings of loss I experience in losing a man, endeared as he is to my heart. Since interestingly enough, it seems to be that a woman is indeed garmented by her man in a kind of transposition of sentiment which somehow manifests itself in her mindset and cloaked as she might be in him to respond to the world.

The overt responses of woman yield the rendered voice of her most loved indeed.

I might say:

'I find that your network of relationships is rather more than I can bear in that my heart likes to love without reticence. 'I say that.

'Actually, it's your entourage, they're not willing for one reason or another to accept me – going on the premise that a marriage of two minds, so to speak, is conceived of as a commitment and without impediment.

As I surmise as such, I think that your ears and heart's decisions reside within them – the entourage. Indeed, they are trusted to you. Frankly, there are more than one or two 'not likely typologies of the reactive, violent, egg shell' variety there and you know that I would like to be free to love you in good company and at all costs – your costs, of course.

However, there is little opportunity afforded on such circumstances as the dichotomy appears to pan out.

Divorce three times. Now I see how it works. You know it is not permitted to divorce in finality all at once, mind, I heard you. You said that some women are divorced up to nine times during their lifetimes. Yes, there are mistakes in the sense that man and woman sometimes negate the other's sense of established equilibrium and then most often, the representative paper of commitment – as if it were.'

'What would you like me to consider as part of your divorce agreement?' He might ask.

'Do you desire future connections with me, or not?' He might ask.

In anger, I say that I do not, that I'd rather not, but then I say that I would like to continue the dance.

Please.

'You know when I divorce once; I consider it as a kind of purification. It does mean that I might remarry you but without the glitches of the previous marriage as it incurred and with new conditions.'

He might say that.

He says, 'Yes, a white page.'

I think of Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton.

'What is it, you said, that you would like to continue to dance?'

He smiles.

'Yes, I say. I cannot leave the dance. I cannot leave it at all.'

'I don't care,' he says.

'I do care,' I say,' but it's a complicated situation and my heart wishes to turn you out in avoidance of the depth of feeling you might mine in me. This is my problem.

In fact, it's a complicated situation because of the mother sister dichotomy and the matter of her little baby boy.'

'I don't want to,' he says. 'I don't want you.'

I might pause before responding, afraid of running across the texture of his heart and as I consider such, I am shouldered in the enclave of another armpit.

'Well then, divorce me and leave me to live in my devastated heart.' I might have said.

(In fact, it is not permitted to bring on such an irretrievable situation.)

Not even for fervour they say as they listen online – his entourage.

So that's it then.

(I repeat that it is not permitted to manipulate conversational responses, imagined or otherwise, not even to draw out such finality, since divorce is a serious matter indeed.)

Then the possibility of the resumption of marriage is a depletion of value in quality and dependent on pleasing repartee until the ring otherwise rotund might be nullified.

Is it a matter of finding a reason to divorce a woman in the polygamous acknowledgment of the importance of the other women in terms of the weight of responsibility of their care? I think it must be so. Perhaps it is.

Mistakes are counted.

'Well then, there must be little space in your heart for love of me since my mistakes of omission are manifold.' I might say.

'I know that a man who loves does not divorce on a whim unless in sighting he finds a new woman more pleasing. Then I say that his marital status is indeed desire dependent. It seems that man prefers the object of desire and that the passé stalwart female variety, however she invests her love, is sometimes discounted and left alone.' I might say.

'I want you to be happy, 'he says.

'Then answer honestly. Is there love in your heart for me, because if there is, then I will not give you a divorce? Yes, there it is, the solution, I mean. 'I say all of this and without the singularity of a gesture.

'However, if there is no love, then by all means proceed to your heart's contentment and I will try to forebear your will patiently.

But I ask something, whatever the outcome.

Scorn me not in my shame before you.'

I might say.

## **Johnny No Shoes**

**Mark L'estrange**

Johnny No Shoes mam a had won a holiday to Florida. He wanted to bring his best friend Larry Lamppost with him, and he was delighted when his mam and dad agreed. She said to him "I better ring your teacher to let her know you won't be back in school until you are back." When she rang the teacher the voice mail said, "This is Ms. Dawson, sorry I won't be back in school, I won tickets to Florida." When she told Johnny he said. "What you mean we are going to be there with the teacher?" They all headed to the airport to go to Florida. Johnny said, "This is some year two holidays in the space of a few months."

The lads made sure to download all their favourite cartoons for the seven-hour flight to New York and then four to Florida. It was so exciting for them all, as the kids spoke about all the cool parks, they will visit they said. "This is going to be the best."

As the plane touched down in New York Johnny and Larry were both very excited to get the next plane to Florida. Luckily the plane was ready to go when they went to departures. The four hours went really fast. When they arrived at the hotel, they went for something to eat.

Then they went to the first team park. Johnny's mam looked down and noticed he had no shoes on. She said "Johnny No Shoes where are your shoes?" "Sorry Mam they were up on my shelf and my step ladder wasn't big enough for me to reach, you know I used to have a big ladder, but it is gone since I was five." All his mam could do was laugh saying. "I have heard some excuses in the past from you, but this is the best." Luckily his dad had a few spare pairs in his bag for emergencies like this one.

## **A toast to fifty years**

**Deirdre Powell.**

It was toward the end of summer, and the cusp of autumn was just around the corner. The sycamore leaves in the avenue were turning a golden brown and the swifts were planning their journey to far-away lands. Mrs. Ellie Lombard sat in her comfy wicker chair in the porch, and though counting her blessings, was relieved that the day was coming to a close. She had had to entertain her four children and 12 grandchildren earlier, and the house had been full of people, presents and prattling – plenty of things to do on this, her fiftieth wedding anniversary, and she was grateful for it, but right now, she was delighted that she had the house to herself, as her husband, Jim, was accompanying one of her children to their home.

She closed her eyes and lazed back in her wicker chair, gently placing her feet on a footstool. She could feel her muscles relaxing and that sense of serene, peaceful calm that had pervaded the house all day was now floating like a blanket on top of her. Her mind wandered to when she was younger – how lucky she had been to have her four children and to have seen them grow up into strong and healthy adults.

True, she felt a bit older, and she almost felt like pinching herself when she realized that her eldest grandchild was now twenty-three. Hard to believe. She smiled to herself, when she thought of that wonderful honey-moon she had spent with Jim all those years ago in Africa, and in her heart, it was as though she could relive those moments when she once saw African elephants in the Amboseli National Park in Kenya. She remembered the hot sun, the dusty plains stretching out before her and the majesty of the elephants with their ivory tusks.

She thought of how the elephants had been a family, and there had been baby elephants in the troupe, which had caught her eye. And now, here she and Jim were, fifty years later, with a troupe of their own. Now that was something to be proud of.

## I Have A Stepladder Because My Real Ladder

Left Me When I was Five

Angelina Kelly

Last year I had the luxury of going on a once-in-a-lifetime holiday to Kenya. I had never been there before but heard so much about it and I was told that it was a must for “the bucket list”.

While I was there I took on many trips and excursions. The one I really wanted to do, however, was The Amboseli National Park, home to many protected species of animal in a close to their natural habitat as was possible environment. Sadly, on the day I chose to go the park was closed due to renovations and the arrival of a new family of pandas. I was devastated because I was going home the following day and had purposely lined this trip up as the highlight of the holiday.

Not willing to miss out I skirted the perimeter of the park for vantage points and managed to get to see a few animals from a distance. As I was looking at a mob of meerkats I heard a thundering noise that made the ground shake under my feet. Just then a herd of elephants came into view, big ones with small ones mixed in among them, and gracefully lumbered close by. A few of them growled and one of them delighted us with a typical trumpet, nodding of the head and a swing of its trunk.

The lush verdant foliage somewhat blocked my view. Deftly, I unzipped my carry bag and brought out a fold-up stepladder. I climbed up onto it which gave me a perfect view and took a few photos before they passed along their merry way.

While I was folding my ladder away, my friend asked me “Why do you carry a stepladder?” With a very matter of fact tone in my voice I replied, “Because my real ladder left me when I was five.”

## Stepladder

Laura Alves

When I was two I could walk everywhere, but sometimes I still couldn't reach places easily because of my height, so I frequently needed the help of a ladder.

I wanted to reach everywhere and to do everything on my own. So I got my parents to buy me a ladder.

They found that really funny as I would still depend on them carrying and placing that ladder wherever I needed it, but in my mind I felt completely independent!

One day, when I was five and felt I was so grown up I could even carry the ladder around, they gave me a stepladder.

It so happened that I carried the big ladder and tripped and fell with it and had to be rushed to hospital, so they decided to give me a handier type of ladder, easier to carry around.

At the beginning I felt like my "old ladder" had left me and had to be replaced with another one, I was a bit sad. But eventually I got used to the stepladder and restored my independence feeling.



## The Jitters /customer complaint

Paul Browne



Dear Counter People,

Having recently received /inherited /stole one of the devices pictured below I travelled to your emporium to procure some coffee to brew in the thing.

Since I'm currently 'shacked up' with a decaf coffee drinking vegan, I was quite excited at the thought of not having to travel twenty or so kilometres for a decent cup of 'giving a damn about anything'. That and the very idea of eating a chicken sandwich without getting a look which suggests that I might actually be running North Korea.

Anyway back to the coffee. A young man behind the counter in The Counter, the shop counter, not the cafe counter, there's two counters in The Counter. Because there are only two counters it's easy to count them. Not the business itself. That's THE Counter. There's only one of them. But we're still talking about the staff. There are loads of them, far too many to count. In The Counter.

Upon presentation of the picture below the gentleman in question, who I now know to being the owner of the strange title 'Dealz Ray', we'll get back to that in a moment, reassured me that he had just the blend which he then ground to perfection and bagged. He guaranteed that it would satisfy my discerning tastes. This wonderfully brewed beverage

made with beans which are harvested by indentured servants in the middle of a jungle was just the thing to solve all my worries and erase all my concerns.

Delighted with my purchase, other than the fact that gram for gram it was more expensive than cocaine, the good stuff that they sell in Dublin, not the substandard nonsense that you get this far into the wilderness, I returned to my country estate. I was eager to enjoy the promised great coffee, the smoothness, the comfort, the sense of safety and satisfaction that can only come from something so reassuringly supplied by a true professional like 'Dealz Ray'.

I commenced brewing the coffee. Taking the brewing device apart I went to fill the bottom half with tap water. Tap water of all things! Remonstrating with myself I fitted a fresh filter to my water cleanser. I find that it's important to do so. Making coffee with anything other than clean water quite defeats the purpose of creating a superior beverage. Once I had filtered out the impurities from the local ground, the slurry, the illegal landfills, a staggering amount of fly tipping, the remains of dead protestants buried under the foundations of the cathedral in Letterkenny and a baffling amount of late eighties /early nineties Republican guns and ammunition I was ready to go.

Having filled the bottom half of the contraption with my wonderfully clean water I spooned Mr. Dealz's coffee into the filter thing. The smell was wonderful! I then used a small brush to clear any loose grains off the rim before attaching the top part and placing it on the stove.

The stove burns gas. Unfortunately it's not piped in as it would be in more sophisticated parts of the world, say Dublin for example, rather it's delivered from a heavy metal can which is attached to ones house by a rubber hose. The metal containers, in turn, make astonishingly effective missiles when thrown at Garda vans by the fans of the Donegal Rally at 3am on a Saturday morning. Or they would if the people attempting to throw them weren't so far out of their boxes that they couldn't even see a Garda van if it was parked on their foot, never mind attack one with a gas cylinder. The intention would still be there though.

As the pot heated, the odour of fresh coffee filled the room and assailed my senses. It lifted my heart to new levels of contentment and I

salivated at the very thought of indulging myself in such luxury. Once brewed the pour into the pre heated cup was tantalisingly smooth and that initial first sip was akin to what I imagine kissing an angel would be like.

While the coffee did seem a little strong, I persisted and drank the full cup. What an appalling error! No sooner had I finished that the most horrific caffeine rush attacked me. All my senses went into overdrive. My ADHD medication was completely overwhelmed and I made a series of mistakes that approached the severity of the ones that I had made by choosing to take three years out of my life to do a degree in media studies. Just not quite as bad.

Wave upon wave of tooth grinding madness overwhelmed me. My intense focus shifted rapidly from one obsession to the next. I haven't found myself in such an appalling state since I stopped driving a school bus in Mexico. It was horrific. The caffeine. Not Mexico. Mexico is actually very nice. You should visit sometime.

After an indeterminate amount of time my heartbeat returned to something akin to its normal rate. As I looked upon the bruises and grazes that I had acquired while under the influence of the fiendish Dealz Rays concoction I wondered what had I done to deserve to have such cruelty visited upon me. He had always seemed so approachable, but this was anything but friendly.

Now that my eyes aren't trying to burst out of my head and the voices within have quietened down a bit I think it may be time for you to have a word with the same Mr. Dealz.

There are only two things that could account for this catastrophe. Perhaps to Dealz Ray I was simply a human potency test for his nefarious plans to upend the swamp like soggy hell hole that is Letterkenny by sending the local chai-moca-chappa-lito-with a splash of soy drinking BMW driving ladies of a certain age into such a powerful collective frenzy of unfocussed nonsense that will have such a profound negative effect on both them and the rest of the town for generations to come, allowing Dealz to take over and bend society to his will.

The only other explanation is that the 'Dealz' moniker may be more appropriate than any of us could ever have imagined. Maybe instead of

coffee I was erroneously supplied with some of the aforementioned cocaine? If that is the case then I was grossly overcharged. Everyone knows that the coffee in The Counter is far more expensive than even the best 'Banger' in town.

Or perhaps I hadn't put enough water in the pot...

## **Stepladder and Elephants**

**Ciaran O'Melia**

To change the stepladder, I was five when my father left the camp and cleared out. My mother saw the back of him when he went off to war. He was sent to Italy, so that is the last we heard of him.

Whether he died or was taken as a POW or one of those women with dark hair who stepped into the kitchen, we never saw the likes of him again.

I've searched high and low; when I went down to the chipper, I had no luck. The dubs all run the chipper instead of the Italians.

Then I went to his last posting, where he was known to have Monte Casino. In truth, I would like him to die saving his comrades.

As a father, I remember having a great time when he was around. But now he is gone, and that is that.

But prompt #1 gave me an idea. What about a herd of elephants? So off to Africa, I go. No! I was not looking for my father; it was down in Kenya. Ye see, I saw a documentary on TV. David Attenborough showed an unusual thing: The herd was going to the new watering hole. But one of the baby elephants was dragging ass. Then one of the adults returned, whispered in his ear with his trunk, and saved him.

"I have a question," Asked Harry "What did he say to the baby."

"Elephant Eze? and I do not know what he said."