



Tales From Under the Marula Tree

by Leon de Villiers

The Porcupine's Pranks



It was a moonless night and the veld restless. There were strange noises and something weird moving in the bushes. Tuffy the porcupine was standing dead still behind the big tree. His heart was racing. It was the perfect night for his plan, but all the noises scared him. He glanced over his shoulder one more time. “No,” he thought and shook his long thick hair.



“I cannot be scared now. Tonight’s the night I’ll get back at them.” His brother Stubbles and his sister Kinks would be coming down that footpath soon. He wanted to give them the biggest fright of their lives. “That’ll teach them for trying to scare me,” he thought.



Only the night before Stubbles had pulled a python skin over his head and made hissing sounds right behind Tuffy. Tuffy had nearly died of fright. And three nights ago, Kinks had painted red berry juice on herself and pretended she had been mauled by a lion. Tuffy had almost had a heart attack that time.

Tuffy put two long white thorns in his mouth, like two vicious fangs. Carefully, he balanced a big piece of bark on his head. It made him look like a vicious monster looking for tasty porcupine meat!



Then Tuffy heard a porcupine coming down the footpath.
Ready, steady ...

“Roarr!” he roared and jumped to the middle of the path.

“Hieeeee!” screamed the porcupine and fell over
backwards.

“Got you!” shouted Tuffy and jumped up and down. “Got
you, got you, got you!” but when he looked carefully, he
saw that it was neither Stubbles nor Kinks lying still on the
ground! It was none other than his own grandfather, Quiff!



“Oh, dear ...” muttered Tuffy and crept closer. He had scared Grandfather Quiff to death! How on earth was he going to explain this to his grandfather?

The old porcupine did not move. Tuffy’s lower lip started to quiver.

“Grandpa Quiff?” he called softly.

“I’m sorry, Gramps,” Tuffy bowed sobbing over his grandfather. “Please forgive me. I thought you were Stubbles or Kinks. Please don’t be dead, Gramps.”

Suddenly, the old porcupine jumped up with a loud snort.



“Weeeee!” shrieked Tuffy and fell over backwards himself.

“Hie-hie, ho-ho, ha-ha,” Grandpa Quiff laughed, holding his belly.

“Grandpa!” scolded Tuffy. He got up very slowly, dizzy from the fright.

Grandpa Quiff snorted with laughter. “Weeee! That was the funniest noise I’ve ever heard coming from a porcupine! Like a toad falling from a tree. Weee!”



At first, Tuffy wanted to be angry with his grandfather, but his grandfather's laughter was so contagious that eventually he started laughing. His grandfather was a very clever prankster.

When they had stopped laughing, Tuffy asked: "But Grandpa, how did you know I was not really a vicious beast?"

"Vicious beasts do not make so much noise when they stalk their prey," Grandpa Quiff laughed. "I could hear you from a mile away. You youngsters should learn how to tread softly like your elders."



Tuffy stroked his long hair. His grandfather was right. He cocked his ears. What was that?

“Did you hear that, Grandpa?” he asked.

“Hmm,” said Grandpa Quiff. “I think something’s stalong us. And I wouldn’t be surprised if it were two little porcupines.”

Tuffy nodded and whispered: “It can only be Stubbles and Kinks. They want to scare us.”



Grandpa Quiff winked at Tuffy and said loudly: “Tuffy, my child, I think we better get back to the hovel. I’ve heard there is a vicious leopard skulking around here lately. One who loves to stalk and catch innocent little porcupines.”

“Yes, Grandpa,” said Tuffy, just as loudly. “I’ve heard the leopard is crazy about porcupine meat. Especially young, tender porcupine meat. It would be best if we went home. I don’t want to be eaten. Any porcupine who is walking around alone tonight will become leopard food.”



Suddenly, all went quiet. Tuffy and Grandpa Quiff listened carefully, but the stalking had stopped. They laughed softly.

“Come on then,” Grandpa Quiff said out loud. “Let’s get a move on.”

“All right, Grandpa,” said Tuffy.

“Let’s pretend we don’t hear a thing until we get to the hovel,” Grandpa Quiff whispered. “Then we’ll suddenly turn around and grab them. They’ll be scared silly.”



Tuffy wanted to burst out laughing, but he kept his paw in front of his mouth.

Just before they reached the hovel, they came across Grandma Curly and Mother and Father Porcupine nibbling on some roots.

“Ooh!” said Grandma Curly. “You almost gave us a fright. It’s a good thing we could hear you coming from a mile



“If we’d wanted to, we could have hidden and really scared you,” said Father Porcupine. “Why were you making such a noise?”

“What noise?” snorted Grandpa Quiff. “You only heard us when we were right next to you. You’re lucky we didn’t want to scare you on purpose.”

“Where are Stubbles and Kinks?” asked Grandma Curly. “And what is that I heard behind you in the dark?”



“Behind us in the dark?” asked Tuffy and winked at the others. “No, Grandma, you must be imagining things. Stubbles and Kinks are probably already at the hovel.”

“Good for them, I say”, said Grandpa Quiff. “With that vicious leopard skulking around here tonight, we’ll have to be very careful. I’ve heard that if he’s stalking a young porcupine, he won’t stop until he’s tasted its meat.”



“Yes,” said Father Porcupine who immediately caught on. “It really is terrible that the leopard has such a preference for young porcupine meat. And our little porcupines are so nice and plump that they must be any leopard’s dream.”

Mother Porcupine nodded. “It would be best if we went back to the hovel as fast as we can. Kinks and Stubbles won’t be so stupid as to be walking around alone on a night like this. I’m sure they must be waiting for us at the hovel.”



Grandma Curly looked from one the other. She did not understand what was going on. “What nonsense!” she said. “We haven’t seen leopard tracks for months around here, let alone a leopard.”

“Shush, Grandma!” whispered Tuffy. “Kinks and Stubbles are close. They can hear everything we say. We want them to be very scared, then we’ll hide at the hovel and frighten them properly.”

“Oh”, said Grandma Curly and smiled. Then she said out loud: “Oh no my children, don’t tell me that nasty old leopard is back. I don’t even want to think about how many innocent little porcupines he had devoured before he finally left here.”



“Maybe it would be best if we went straight back to the hovel after all,” said Mother Porcupine. “I don’t want Kinks and Stubbles waiting at the hovel all by themselves.”

The porcupine trotted back to the hovel in a line. They were trying their best not to burst out laughing. The noises behind them in the dark sounded like whoever it were were in a big hurry.

When they got to the hovel, Tuffy whispered: “Shall we hide outside here or inside the hovel?”

“Outside,” said Grandpa Quiff.



“Inside”, argued Grandma Curly.

“Quiet, they’ll hear us,” said Father Porcupine.

“Who are you talking about?” asked Stubbles from inside and peered out of the hovel.

“Yes, who are they?” asked Kinks and pushed past him.

Tuffy and the others looked very surprised. Then Tuffy burst out laughing. “You must have run like the wind to get here before we did.”



“Why would we run?” asked Stubbles.

“To get away from the leopard,” said Grandpa Quiff. “From the vicious leopard.”

“Humph,” Stubble said to Kinks. “I suppose we have to be scared now.”

“That thing doesn’t even look like a leopard,” said Kinks.

“What thing?” asked Grandma Curly.

“That thing behind you. Is that what you wanted us to be afraid of?” asked Stubbles.



“Yes,” said Kinks. “You can come out now, Mister Badger, or whoever they got to scare us this time.”

“What are you talking about, child?” asked Mother Porcupine.

“This,” said Stubbles and pushed the bushes aside. “Your beastly old leopard.”

For one very long moment, it was dead quiet. The leopard stared at the seven porcupines and the seven porcupines stared at the leopard. Then the porcupines were scared.



They were exactly as frightened as they had always wanted each other to be. They were so scared that their long thick hair stood on end – stiff and straight. And then they fell flat on their tummies, all seven of them.

It was the strangest sight the leopard had ever seen. The seven porcupines were turned into bunches of quills, their long straight hair stiff and sharp as nails. With a disappointed grunt, he turned around and walked away. “Grrr,” he growled.



“Their talk of tender porcupine meat had my mouth watering. And all for nothing. Those quills would only give me a sore throat.”

Ever since that day, porcupines do not have long thick hair anymore, but their bodies are covered in quills. And it was also the end of their pranks.

“Oh no, Fiddler,” says Aunt Mangy, annoyed. “Now you’ve scared the little ones with your talk of leopards. Tonight they’ll all want to sleep on the same branch again.”

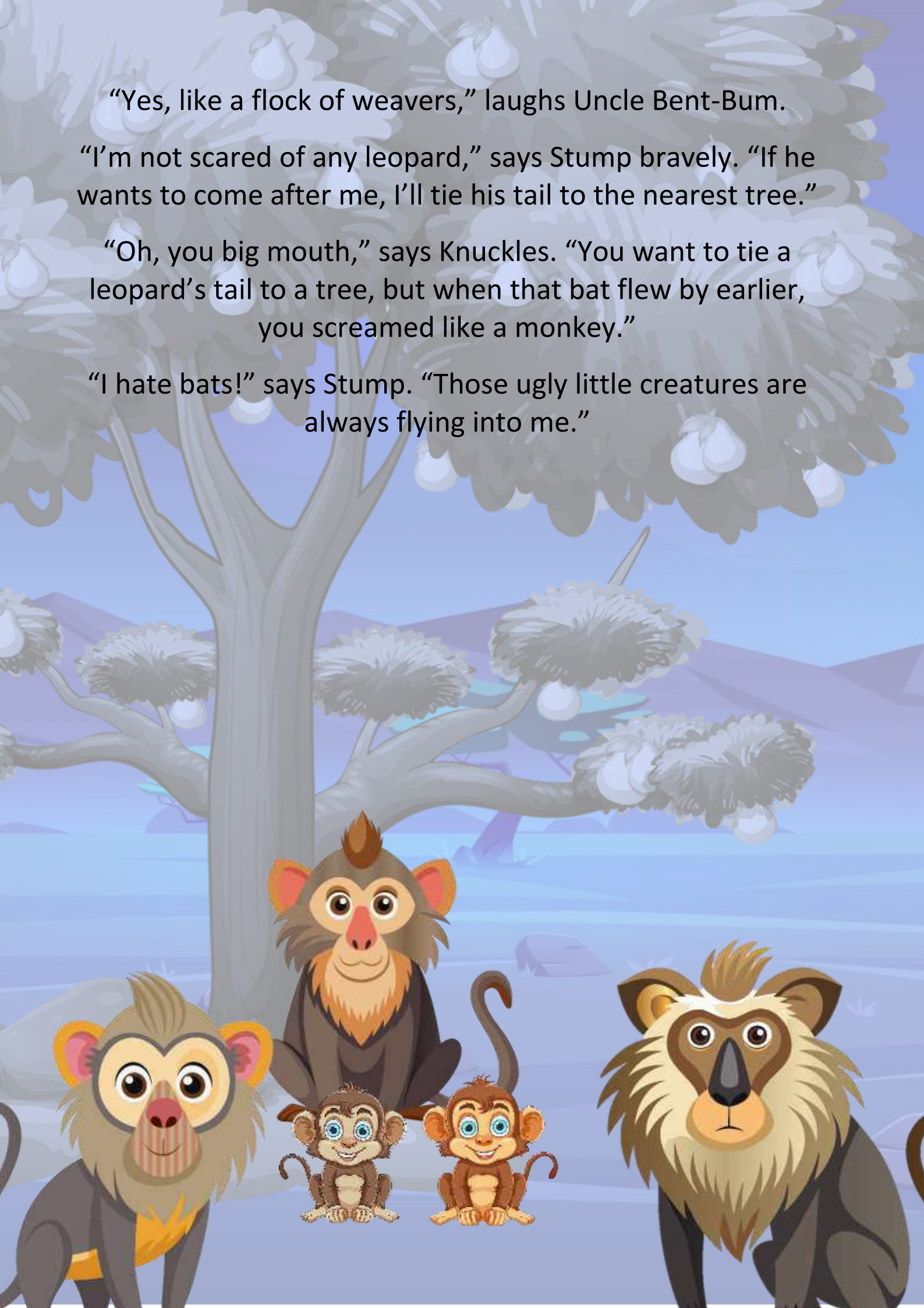


“Yes, like a flock of weavers,” laughs Uncle Bent-Bum.

“I’m not scared of any leopard,” says Stump bravely. “If he wants to come after me, I’ll tie his tail to the nearest tree.”

“Oh, you big mouth,” says Knuckles. “You want to tie a leopard’s tail to a tree, but when that bat flew by earlier, you screamed like a monkey.”

“I hate bats!” says Stump. “Those ugly little creatures are always flying into me.”

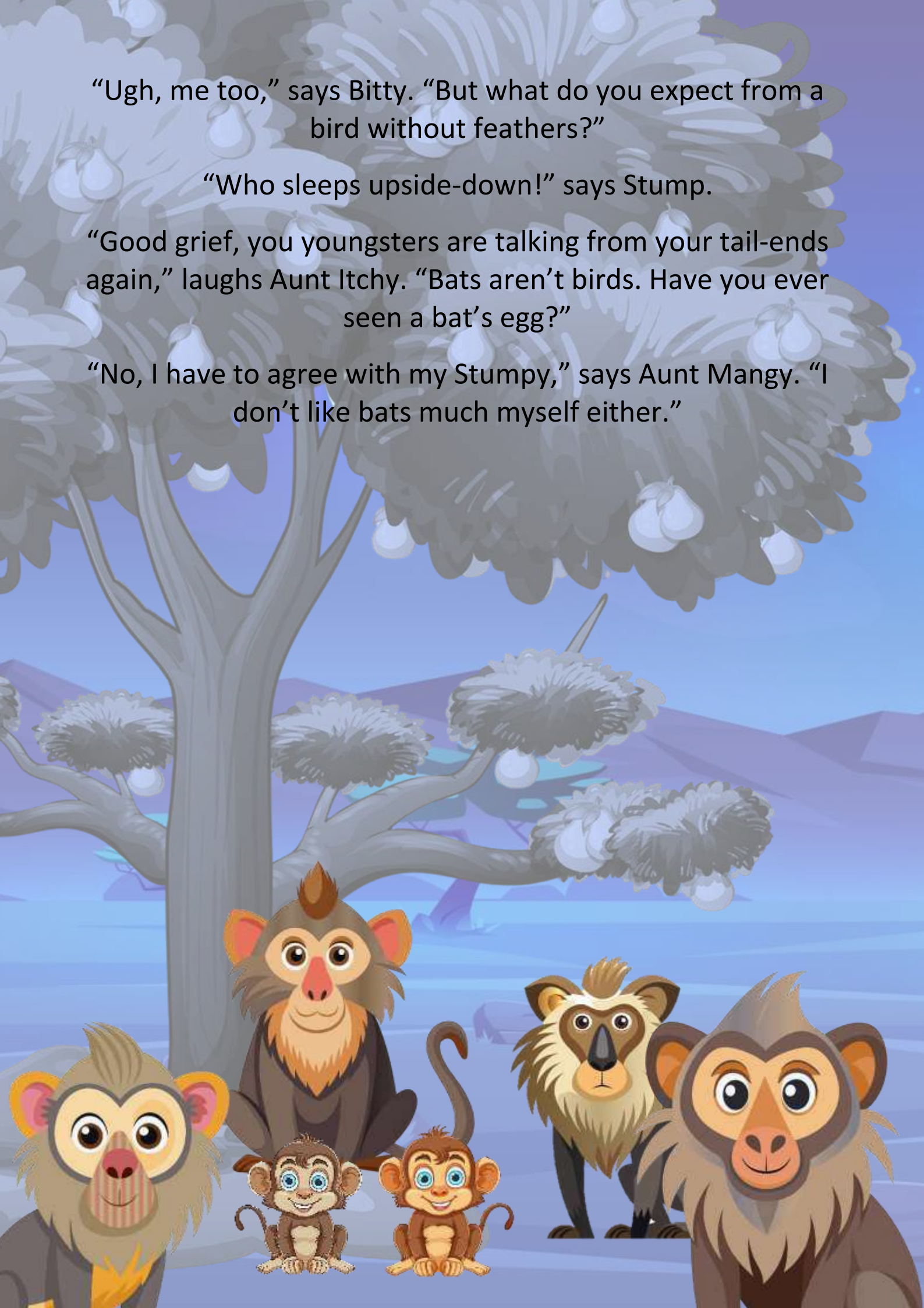


“Ugh, me too,” says Bitty. “But what do you expect from a bird without feathers?”

“Who sleeps upside-down!” says Stump.

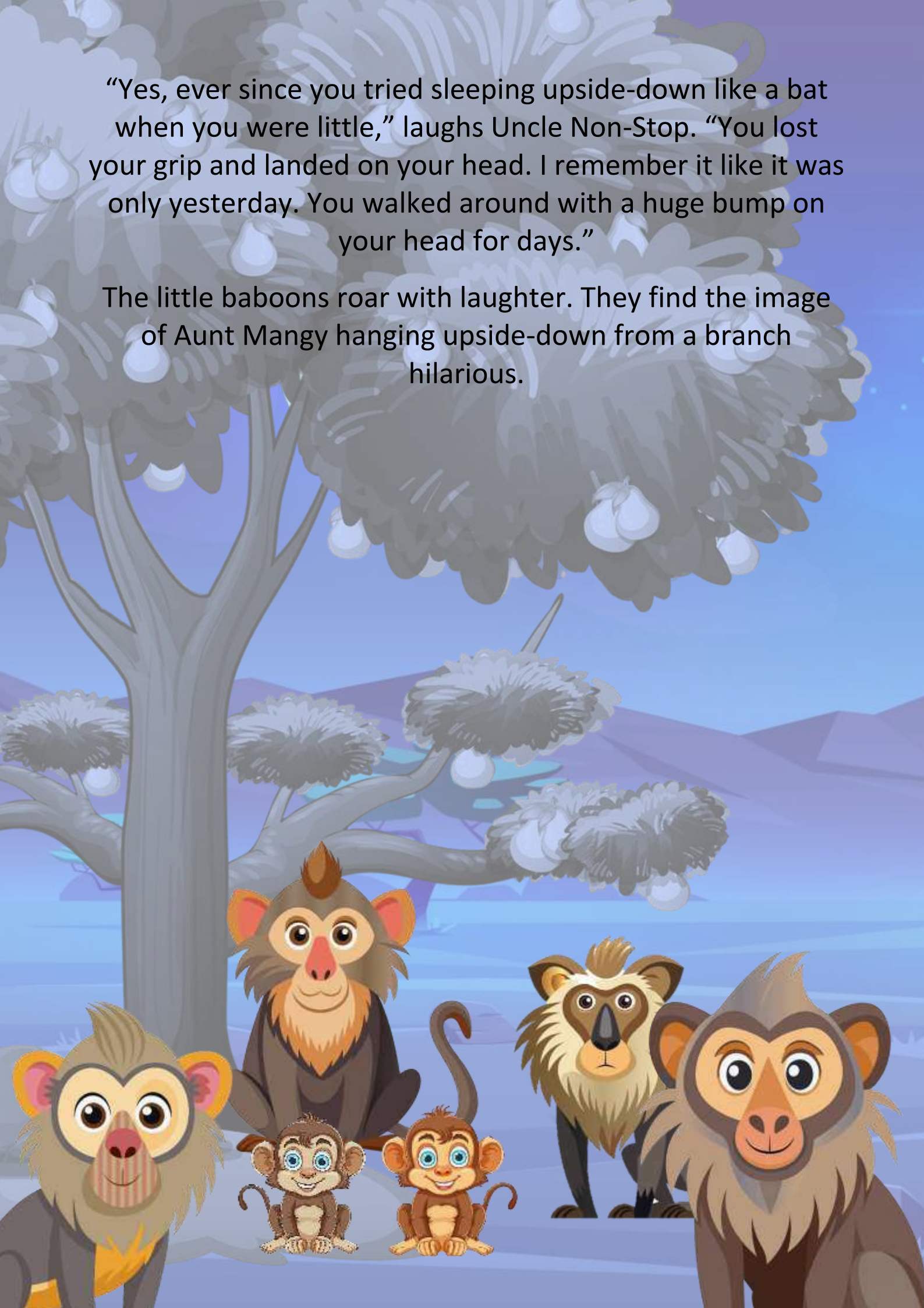
“Good grief, you youngsters are talking from your tail-ends again,” laughs Aunt Itchy. “Bats aren’t birds. Have you ever seen a bat’s egg?”

“No, I have to agree with my Stumpy,” says Aunt Mangy. “I don’t like bats much myself either.”



“Yes, ever since you tried sleeping upside-down like a bat when you were little,” laughs Uncle Non-Stop. “You lost your grip and landed on your head. I remember it like it was only yesterday. You walked around with a huge bump on your head for days.”

The little baboons roar with laughter. They find the image of Aunt Mangy hanging upside-down from a branch hilarious.



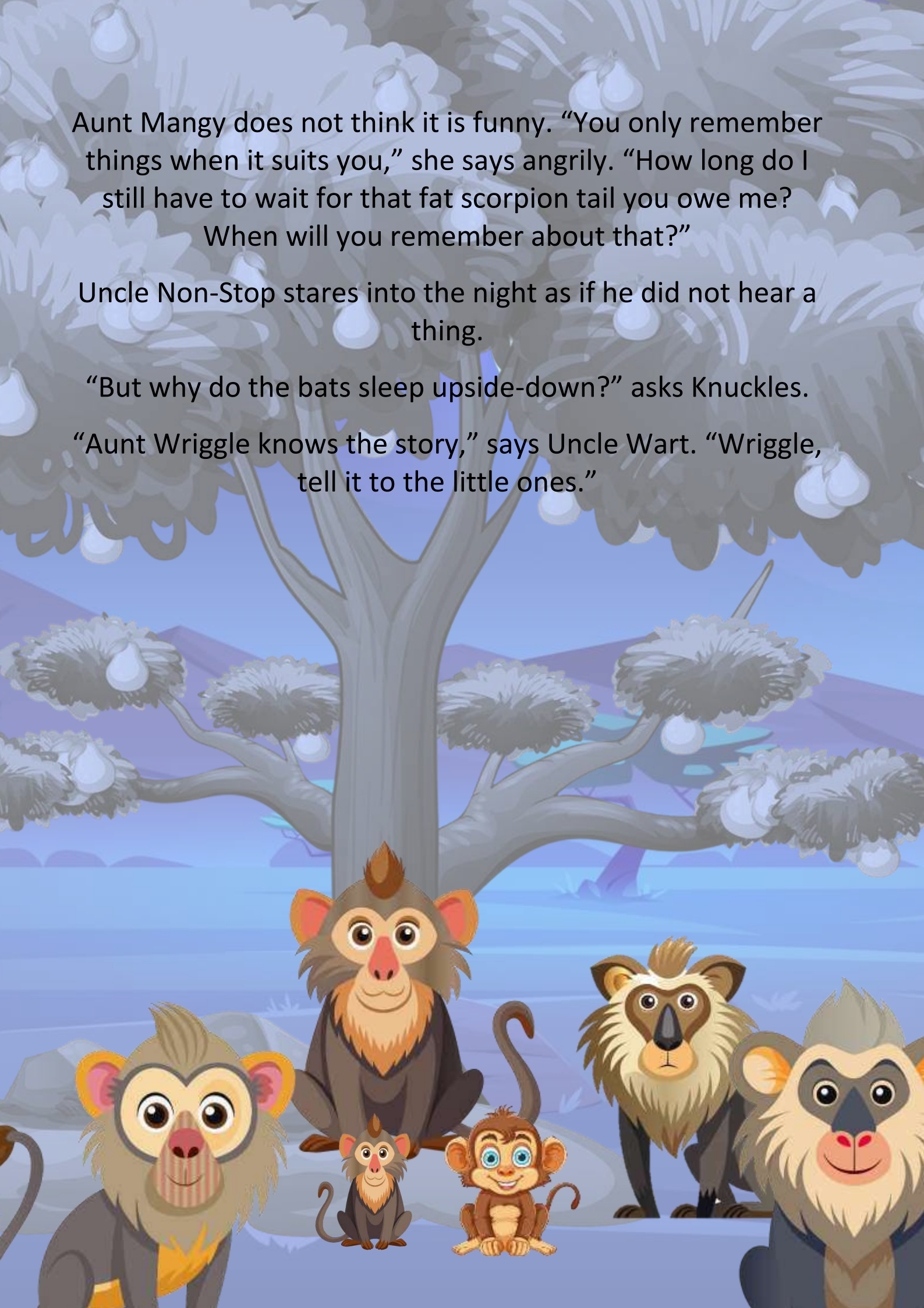
Aunt Mangy does not think it is funny. “You only remember things when it suits you,” she says angrily. “How long do I still have to wait for that fat scorpion tail you owe me?

When will you remember about that?”

Uncle Non-Stop stares into the night as if he did not hear a thing.

“But why do the bats sleep upside-down?” asks Knuckles.

“Aunt Wriggle knows the story,” says Uncle Wart. “Wriggle, tell it to the little ones.”



“Oh dear”, sighs Aunt Wriggle. “Just as I was falling asleep.”

“You sleep like there’s no tomorrow, sister,” says Aunt Jiggle-Jowl. “Wake up and tell the children about the bats sleeping upside-down.”



