

The Wondrous Tale of the Little Prince

Based on *Le Petit Prince* by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry

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1.

Once there was a little boy who had seen a drawing of a boa constrictor in a book about the jungle. In the drawing, it was easy to see that the giant snake had just eaten a wild animal. Next to the picture it read: *Boa constrictors swallow their prey without chewing. Afterwards, they can't move, so they sleep for up to six months to digest their food.*

The little boy thought that was so interesting that he read all the books about the jungle he could find. Eventually, he decided to make his own drawing—his very first drawing ever. He showed his masterpiece to the grown-ups.

“Does this picture scare you?” he asked.

“Scare us?” the grown-ups said. “What’s so scary about a hat?”

But it wasn’t a hat—it was a picture of a boa constrictor that had swallowed an elephant!

Oh brother, the little boy thought. Grown-ups never see things for what they are—you always have to explain everything to them. Then he drew the inside of the boa constrictor so the people would understand what it was.

His second picture looked like this: [picture of the inside of the boa constrictor]

But do you know what they said?

“Stop all that drawing nonsense, and don’t bother with the insides and outsides of boa constrictors anymore. Practice your arithmetic, read, write, and work hard in geography and history. All that’s much more important than drawing.”

The little boy didn’t dare to make a third drawing, let alone a fourth. And that’s how, already at the age of six, he decided that he would never become a painter.

This meant that he had to choose another profession, so he decided to become an airplane pilot. He traveled around the world and discovered that all the geography he’d learned was very useful indeed. For example, he could look down and easily tell the difference between China and France. That came in pretty handy when he was lost.

On his travels, the pilot met all sorts of people, including the kind who considered themselves Very Important. Many of them he did not like at all. He would take out his old drawing, which he had kept all those years, and ask them what they thought it was. Most of them said: “A hat.”

A hat! Oh brother! Those Very Important People sure weren’t very smart.

At that, the pilot wouldn’t say anything more about jungles or boa constrictors. He’d just go on chatting with the Very Important People about Very Important Matters. “What a smart man that pilot is,” they must have thought, “he has so many intelligent things to say!” The pilot just let them think that.

I’ll tell you a secret—that little boy who grew up to be a pilot...that was me.

I'm an old man now, and I'd finally like to tell you a story I've never told anyone before. I was afraid that no one would believe me, but I'm not afraid anymore. As long as you believe me—that's all I care about! The story is about my friend the little prince. It's been a long time since I last saw him, and sometimes I'm afraid that I might forget him. Of course, I can't let that happen! The joy of having a friend is very special, which is why I want to tell you about him, so he'll always live in our memories.

I've bought some colored pencils and paints to help me tell this story. I'll try to draw things as I remember them—which may or may not be how they really looked. You weren't there, so you can't say, "That's not what the little prince looked like!" or "His clothes weren't that color!" or "He was much smaller (or bigger) than that!"

Actually, if you ask me, I draw pretty well for someone who hasn't picked up a pencil since he was a little boy.

(Psst...by the way, remember those drawings I made as a little boy? I now know that they weren't total failures. The grown-ups just didn't get it.)

My story begins on the day I was flying alone in my plane and the engine started to sputter. Fortunately, I was a very good pilot and managed to make an emergency landing in the nick of time.

Bam! There I was—in the middle of the desert, a thousand miles from civilization, completely alone...

2.

Everywhere I looked, there was nothing but sand. Sand, sand and more sand. Even far off in the distance, there wasn't a single tree or bush in sight. I felt lonelier than a shipwrecked sailor in the middle of the sea.

What would I do? I only had enough water for one week, and I didn't know if I would be able to fix the engine all by myself. But there was nothing more I could do that day. It was getting dark, and I was so tired that I fell asleep in the sand.

The next morning, I was awoken by a sweet, little voice: "Could you please draw me a sheep?"

I sat up and rubbed my eyes.

"Draw me a sheep," the little voice asked again.

There, in front of me was a little boy with an earnest look on his face. He didn't look scared or lost, nor did he seem particularly tired or hungry.

"Who are you?" I asked.

He didn't answer. Instead, he asked a third time, "Can you draw a sheep for me? Come on, please."

I hadn't drawn any pictures since my first two attempts as a boy. "I can't draw," I replied grumpily.

"That doesn't matter," said the little boy. "Just draw me a sheep."

I don't know why, but I took a fountain pen and a piece of paper from my pocket and drew—not a sheep—but a boa constrictor that had swallowed an elephant.

To my surprise, the little boy said: "I don't want an elephant inside a boa constrictor. That snake is way too dangerous and an elephant is way too big! I don't have that much room. I need a sheep. Come on, draw me a sheep."

A little overwhelmed, I drew him a sheep. The little boy looked at the drawing and said: "That sheep looks sick. Draw me another one."

I tried.

"That's not a sheep," the little boy said. "That's a ram. It has horns."

I tried again, but he wasn't satisfied with that sheep either. I started getting impatient. I kept drawing him sheep, but they were either too big or too small or too old.

"I don't want an old sheep," the little boy said. "My sheep has to live for a long time." By then, I'd had enough. I scribbled on the paper and said: "There, this is a box. Your sheep is inside. Now, if you'll excuse me, I need to go fix my engine." I stood up to leave.

The little boy looked at the box and beamed.

"That's exactly what I wanted!" he exclaimed. Then, he furrowed his brow.

"But do you think this sheep eats a lot of grass?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Because I have a very small yard at home, and there's not much grass."

"No problem," I said. "I gave you a very small sheep."

He studied the drawing closely and said, "Well, it's not *so* small, is it?" He pressed his nose into the paper and whispered, "The little sheep is sleeping, I see..."

3.

This was my first encounter with the little prince. It took a while to figure out who he was and where he was from. Because even though I asked him all kinds of questions, he never gave an answer. Instead, he just kept asking *me* questions.

"What's that thing?" he asked, for example, when he saw my plane.

"That's not a thing," I said, "it's a plane. *My* plane."

"So you fell out of the sky!" The little prince started to laugh.

That made me mad! As if my plane crash was some kind of joke—I could have died!

Then the little prince asked me something very strange: "What planet are you from?"

What an odd question, I thought.

"Are you come from another planet, then?" I asked cautiously.

Once again, he didn't answer. He looked at my airplane and gently shook his head.

"You can't have come from very far in that thing..." he said.

Then he just stood there, thinking. I kept waiting for him to say something, but he didn't.

"But where are you from?" I asked again. "And what do you need that sheep for?"

He thought about it for a long time. "You know what's handy?" he said finally. "My sheep is in a box, which means he already has his own little house. That'll give him a comfy place to sleep at night."

"Of course," I said, just to say something. "And if you're good, I'll give you a rope so you can tie him up during the day."

"Tie up my sheep? What for?"

"Otherwise he might wander off."

The little boy burst into laughter. "Wander off? Where to?"

"Somewhere. I don't know, he might just start walking straight."

The little prince sighed. "Where I live it's so small that there is no straight," he said sadly. "No, that sheep won't wander off. There's nowhere for him to go."

4.

The little prince's planet was apparently so small that wandering off was out of the question. Naturally, I'd learned by then that there are all kinds of planets out there, big and small. I also knew that every so often, a new planet is found, and sometimes it's so tiny that, even with the best telescope in the world, you can barely see it. Whenever one is found, it's usually assigned a number, like "Asteroid number 3251."

Grown-ups love numbers. For example, when you make a new friend, they don't ask what his voice sounds like, what his favorite games are or whether he likes butterflies. No, instead they ask, "How old is he? How big is he? Does he have brothers and sisters? How much money does his father make?"

They think these things are important for getting to know someone. Numbers, that's all those grown-ups care about. For example, if you try to tell them about a pretty house you saw, with a red roof and a balcony with beautiful flower boxes, they don't even hear you. All they want to know is that it costs one hundred thousand dollars, and then they say, "What a deal!"

By the way, do you believe me when I tell you that the little prince really exists? You probably do. Because such an enchanting little person, a person who wanted nothing more than a sheep—why, you can't just make that kind of person up, now can you? It doesn't work that way with grown-ups. Grown-ups want to hear that the little prince came from asteroid B612—that's a teeny tiny planet that's only ever been spotted once but really exists. So if a person comes from that planet, that person must really exist. That's how grown-ups think. You have to be really patient with them.

5.

Little by little, I discovered the wondrous tale of the little prince—his small planet, his journey, and his thoughts and dreams. On the third day he asked, "Do sheep eat only grass or do they eat other plants too?" I didn't know for sure, but still, I replied, "Yes, they eat other plants too."

“Oh, that’s a relief.”

“Why is that a relief?”

“Because that means they probably eat baobab trees too.”

At that, I had to laugh. First of all, baobab trees aren’t plants, and second, they’re so big that a whole herd of elephants couldn’t eat one of them.

I told him so.

“Ha-ha,” laughed the little prince. “No, the elephants would have to stack on top of each other.”

Then he turned serious. “But even baobab trees start out very small, don’t they?”

“Yes, even baobab trees start as tiny seeds.”

“Exactly,” said the little prince. “And that’s why I need my sheep.”

I still didn’t know what he was talking about.

“On my planet the ground is full of baobab tree seeds,” he explained. “You can’t see them, but once they sprout from the ground, you have to pull them out right away. Otherwise, they grow into trees, you understand? Trees with roots so big that they’re ripping my planet apart.”

He looked at me sadly. “And that’s why I need a sheep.”

“But how do you know that the sheep won’t eat the flowers sprouting up too?” I asked.

The little prince didn’t answer.

“And now I would like you to draw a baobab tree for me,” he said.

I shook my head. “I can’t.”

“Just try. You’ll never know until you try.”

He was right about that.

So I tried, but it didn’t work. It really didn’t work.

Now, all these years later, I’m telling you this story and I’d like to try again.

Look, this is what a baobab tree looks like: [drawing of a baobab tree]

Actually, the little prince told me to warn you about baobab trees. But I’m not going to do that. A baobab tree can certainly be dangerous to a small planet, but it can’t possibly damage the planet Earth. In fact, baobab trees are very important to our planet. I recently heard that these trees have been having a hard time lately. Maybe people haven’t taken very good care of them...

Of course, that’s what the little prince was getting at: it’s up to us to take good care of our planet every day and to protect it from danger, otherwise, it might fall apart. He has a point, don’t you think?

6.

On the fourth day, the little prince said, “Let’s go watch the sunset.”

I told him I didn't have time for sunsets. I had to fix my plane.

"Besides, the sun isn't going to set for a while," I said. "We have to wait for it."

"Wait for it? Why?"

"Because the sun doesn't go down until the end of the day."

He thought about this for a moment.

"Oh yeah," he said. "Sometimes I think that I'm on my own planet."

I looked at him curiously. "What do you mean?" I asked.

"Where I live, it all happens very quickly. If I want to see the sunset, all I have to do is move my chair. I've seen the sunset forty-three times in one day." He sighed. "I was very sad back then, so I didn't mind watching the sunset so often."

"Why were you so sad?" I asked.

Again, the little prince didn't answer. He never answered. He only told me the things he wanted to tell me.

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