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The Lands of Talking Animals

The Lands of Talking Animals

by

Ryder W. Miller

It had been a long wait and the dog was old now and almost ready to go. Esmeralda had waited years now and Spot was ready to fulfill his promise. Other members of the family did not know that Spot talked. He did not talk much. Unlike a lot of dogs he was not terribly friendly. He would bark at others and smell other dogs, but he did not spend a lot of time with them. He did sometimes talk to Esmeralda alone.

She was surprised at first.

“I will help you if you keep this secret,” Spot said in a British accent. Spot was a Basset Hound with a white circle over one of his eyes. The rest of him was a mixture of brown, black and off white. He had very long droopy ears.

Esmeralda could not believe her ears. Spot said so again, but she had to double check with her mother about this.

When she mentioned this to her mother, she smiled a big smile. Her father would laugh kindly. Esmeralda decided not to tell too many others. They did not believe her, but they weren't too mean about it. She would let Spot decide when they should talk. He was hard to understand because he usually spoke English. She was learning English in school, but it was taking a while for it all to sink in. Her parents spoke both English and Spanish, but it was hard for this dog to learn some new tricks. Spot understood some Spanish also, but he liked English better. Esmeralda thought it sounded better to him.

Spot, though, was kind of an imaginary friend. He had promised to take her one day to the land where animals talked. She had

not been old enough to go when they first got him. He also swore her to secrecy. Esmeralda decided not to mention it to her parents again. Someday she wanted to be able to meet all these animals. Spot did let her know that they would not all be friendly. Esmeralda wondered what they would sound like. She wondered if they would all sound like they were from New York. Spot had developed some of the accent and sounded like he moved to the city a long time ago.

When the wait was no longer so long Spot let her know in the Spring. She was almost 12 now and would be able to converse with the animals in both English and Spanish. He could take her there when she took him out on a walk.

“We need to wait for the fire flies,” Spot explained when they were alone. “They know the secret way. They can take you to the Land of the Talking Animals.”

Esmeralda was almost ready to be able to take the dog out on a walk by herself. The park could be magical. She would have Spot as a companion for protection. They had had a private friendship that Esmeralda would not even tell her parents about anymore. She did have a friend who did not believe her at first. Joy was in the same grade as she was and also laughed at first when Esmeralda told her that Spot could talk.

“Prove it,” she demanded.

Spot at first did not want to talk with her. It took a couple of visits for them to find some time alone with the dog. Spot would usually bark. It was not a terribly loud bark, but then again Spot was not trying to scare people off. He was a good protector and

could have a frightening growl.

He had grown older now and it was time for him to take Esmeralda to the magical land one could find through the park. She, however, did not yet know how to go to the park alone with Spot. She would have to figure a way to do it. She might offer to take the dog alone by herself. They might not allow her to. She was more likely to be able to get away from her parents if Joy was there. Maybe they both could take Spot out for a walk?

Spot had told her that if one knew how to speak with the Fire Flies that they could take you to that special land. Esmeralda had to figure out how to make it into the park at night with Spot. The twilight would be okay, but her parents might not let her go on a walk by herself. That is where Joy might help, but maybe not. It would be hard to coordinate.

There were also the big concerts they had in the park during the summers. Maybe on one of these they could break away for a few minutes. They called each other girlfriends and the three of them should be safe on their own for a few minutes. Spot said that would be enough time. In that other land time did not pass in the same way. They could go into this land and return only a few minutes later. Joy said it sounded like Narnia.

Spot would be the one who could take them to this land. He would know how to speak with the Fire Flies. They sure did seem magical. They did not light the night up, but they did dance wonderfully. Magic they were, thought Esmeralda. Joy liked watching them also. Spot said they could take them on a visit or maybe an adventure if necessary.

The problem was how to break away from the parents for ten minutes. Mom and Dad were protective, but they also liked some time alone. As she grew older they would let her venture out more on her own,

for short trips to the corner of the street.

Esmeralda was afraid Spot would not be with them much longer. His words had got slurred recently. Sometimes Spot would just give Esmeralda a knowing look when he wanted something. It was sort of a nonverbal code to let her know that they could not talk until later. Sometimes Esmeralda could hear things in his barking, but now he got tired faster.

During the summer concerts in the park she might be able to go with him. It was already a long wait, but it might be mostly over. Joy would be a partner in this. They would have to break away for a few minutes during twilight. She could probably get away with this because her parents did not mind when she was the one cleaning up after the dog. They would be able to dance alone for a few minutes while the music played.

She did not want to run away from her parents. Her parents were kind and funny. They took the time to explain things when it was necessary.

This fantasy world sounded intriguing though. She wanted to see what the animals sounded like when they talked. She wondered if they had accents like Spot?

Spot explained why they were in the park. The park could be a wonderful meeting place for all sorts of people. Sometimes the animals would sneak into Esmeralda's world and observe the people. If the entrance ways were far out in the country they would not be able to meet many people. The park attracted all sorts of people. Some were there for sports and exercise. Others to commune with the outdoors. Some went to events. There could be some great music in the park. There would be dancing, lights and fireflies.

Spot knew how to indicate that he had to take a "dump." Joy, though, would not clean up after him.

"It is your dog," Joy would say.

Cleaning up after him was like a chore she did for the family.

Spot gave her a sad look one day and just whispered, "Sorry. I can't do it myself."

Esmeralda loved Spot and gave him a hug. She had learned things from him during her life.

"Study for school," he would tell her. "Get good grades," "Don't be friends with everyone," "Eat your vegetables." Spot would not eat her food, insisting she needed it: "For you."

Spot, as far as she knew, did not bark up the wrong tree. He also protected her and the family. He had a loud bark even though he was not as big as some other dogs. Esmeralda, when she was older and had read a romance or two, was sad for him that he was a lonely bachelor. They did not want to let him go and they could not find a mate for him.

One night when the poster and fliers for the concerts in the park had arrived, Esmeralda listened carefully while her parents discussed which concerts they were going to go to this season. She would be able to look at the flier to find the dates. For now she would just listen to see which shows they were planning to go and make plans with Spot.

Dad didn't like to dance, but he would dance to Mambo and Latin Jazz. Mom tried to pull him to the dance floor for more and usually succeeded, but he volunteered for this type of music. They did not know the names of a lot of the bands, but that did not matter. They were excited to be out there in crowd with the music blasting.

Esmeralda set her mind on a concert in early June. She did not want to wait the whole summer for this to occur. She would make plans for Joy to join them. While their parents danced they would take Spot into the woods for a few minutes, or so it would seem to their parents.

She would take that walk while a band named Hidalgo played in the night. They should provide the necessary distraction.

Spot explained how he knew how to talk with the Fire Flies. They were regular residents in The Land of the Talking Animals. They were Gatekeepers who normally would not let people into their world. Spot said that he was missed.

"Don't you love us?" Esmeralda asked, saddened by the fact that Spot might be happier elsewhere.

"I have been happy among you, but I have not been able to speak much. I miss my own kind," he responded.

"I look forward to meeting your friends," she responded.

"Yes that would be fun. Keep this between us."

Esmeralda thought about telling her parents that Spot would talk to her, but they would think that she was "Mucho Loca." The old dog had gotten reticent in recent years also.

The family sat together in the park that night while Hidalgo warmed up. It was dark already. Joy had joined them. She had heard Spot speak a few times, but she also decided to keep this between the three. She and Esmeralda had grown beyond the age where she could pretend that she had secret friends or that animals could talk to her.

"Narnia is just fiction," Joy's mother explained to her. "Animals can talk among themselves, but sadly we cannot talk to them."

"What about in Narnia?"

"Narnia, though wonderful, doesn't really exist. The movies are also a fantasy."

Joy was saddened by this. She was amazed by Spot, who explained that if people know about him he would be put into a circus somewhere. He explained that he was too old for that. He really did not have a lot of advice for mankind. There was so

much variety and dissension. There were plenty of good people trying to solve problems. They might think that they had been invaded by talking animals.

They actually had been. Not for conquest, but rather to find out information about this world. Animals were dependent upon people in this dangerous world. Certain kinds of animals were there to be bred and harvested. As a dog he would not suffer that fate with most. Spot was not sure what to think about people, but he liked Esmeralda and her family. He liked Joy, who spoke his language better.

Now they walked through the night while the band played. Esmeralda let her parents know that she was taking Spot for a walk and would return in a few minutes. The parents decided to dance where they were rather than join the crowd. Cleaning up after a dog might change their mood. They were happy to not have this chore on this festive night.

“Be back in five or so minutes,” said the mother.

Esmeralda nodded. Spot winked at her to let her know that that would be enough time.

Joy giggled as they walked into the woods in the night.

When they had made a little bit of distance, after they could not see the parents through the trees, Spot let out a welcoming growl.

A few Fire Flies gathered around them.

Esmeralda noticed that Spot seemed to have a smile on his face. Joy was giggling.

“This is going to work,” said Spot as a lit doorway formed before them. It seemed as if nobody else saw the gate. They would be walking into sunlight. There was a green field and path before them.

“This is only going to take a few minutes?” asked Esmeralda again.

“Not even here in the park. Let us move fast while we have time,” said Spot.

Joy was ecstatic. She had read about such things before.

“We are the only ones who will see the door. Hurry,” said Spot.

They saw Fire Flies blinking in and out along the entrance way.

Esmeralda took the leash off of Spot and put it over her shoulder as they walked into the green field. The sun was shining brightly between the large clouds.

They were now in The Land of the Talking Animals.

“Fantastica,” thought Esmeralda.

Joy was more used to such things and was less surprised. She had read more of these types of stories and was now in one. She seemed to recognize where they were, but she knew there would be surprises.

Esmeralda was surprised that the grass, trees, sky, and clouds all looked the same.

Spot was beaming. Esmeralda noticed that he did not look sad and tired like he usually did.

“Where to now, Spot?” Esmeralda asked.

“We don’t need to rush. Let’s look for the town by the river,” he said.

Joy was smiling. It was like a fantasy story coming true.

“This isn’t Narnia?” she asked Spot.

“No. No wars and coronations on this trip, I think,” said Spot. “Onward across the fields we go. Where it will take us I don’t really know. I have not been here in a long time.”

“Why did you connect us to your world?” asked Esmeralda.

“Wasn’t my choice. I think we found you interesting. I think the top folks thought we could learn from you. Your world was easy to infiltrate. You also had animals,” Spot responded.

Slowly they made their way across the fields. The grass was not cut and uneven, but

it was mostly flat as it ran down towards the stream.

Esmeralda wondered if the water would be the same color as it was on her world. There was a lot of variation, she reminded herself.

As they walked she began to hear the river. Spot, though, was humming a tune they had never heard before. Esmeralda knew it was not Latin Jazz. It sounded more popular and theatrical, but she could not identify it.

As they got closer to the water they noticed there was a path they could follow along its length. The water was mostly clear. They could see the rocks underneath the surface of the water. There was algae on a lot of the rocks. They occasionally saw fish swim by. Esmeralda thought they looked normal enough. The sound of the moving water was soothing. They rested for a time there by the stream listening to the sound of the leaves through the tree. There were more plants by the water. The trail led them through woods on the banks of the stream.

Esmeralda wondered if the birds would talk with them. Joy expected them to. Spot would lead the way.

“When was the last time you were here?” asked Joy.

“You might not have been born yet,” said Spot.

They knew he could bark if there was trouble. Esmeralda knew he had a mighty bark, and quite a bite to back it up. There though there were probably more dangerous things here.

“Are you leading us to a town or the king?” asked Esmeralda.

“This trail led to a town. We will have to wait and see if it is still there,” said Spot.

Joy and Esmeralda did not find themselves tired, but they slowed down to follow Spot like usual. Esmeralda wondered what language these animals would speak.

When she looked at her watch she noticed that it was not working. It was still the evening time when they left the concert.

Joy was not being introspective. She had a rambunctious gait as they walked down the path. They had not been walking for long when they heard a voice from the tree tops.

“Who goes there?” said something.

They all looked up and saw an Owl. It was young and gray. Its eyes and expression changed as she contemplated these visitors. They could tell it was a female from the sound of the voice.

“Who goes there, I say,” repeated the Owl.

“Why, it is I, Spot, and some visitors. You might remember me by the name Ruffous?”

“I have never heard of you,” said the Owl.

“I am here on my way to Dog Town. Is it still here? Some should remember Ruffous there.”

“Yes it is. It has always been there as far as I am concerned. It was there before me.”

“Any news afoot?” asked Spot.

“Why I hear there is supposed to be an election. There will be a new Mayor for Dog Town. It might have happened already.”

“That doesn’t concern us,” said Esmeralda.

“We are not going to be here for a long time,” said Joy.

Spot barked and then said sadly, “There might be a necessary change of plans.”

Esmeralda grew worried, but Joy smiled.

“This might be an adventure,” Joy said.

“What if they bark at us or bite us?” said Esmeralda.

“I think we more have to worry about living with the stink. They all might not be able to clean up after themselves.”

Esmeralda smiled and was happy that they brought Joy along. She seemed the most at home here of the three so far.

“Onward we go,” Spot said to the Owl.

It was late in the day now and they decided to rest under a big tree a little bit away from the stream. They found fruit trees to eat, and had apples and oranges for dinner. Spot was content with an apple. He left them for a few minutes to relieve himself.

They went to sleep while the moon rose.

They heard murmurings in the woods, but Spot had told them not to worry.

“Who are those two?” said a passing Fox.

“Are they really going to Dog Town?” said a Mockingbird.

“I wonder if those two also know how to talk?” said one Squirrel to another.

Esmeralda was not worried. Spot was a light sleeper and his bark would scare things away. Joy had said earlier that she was looking forward to her dreams in this land. They would wake up with the sun. They might be a bit chilled and moistened by the chilly night, but so far they were comfortable sleeping.

Esmeralda was the first to wake. She was surprised that the snoring woke her. Spot was sleeping on his belly and Joy had nestled her head into the roots of a tree.

There was dew on the ground that morning and a light mist being cleared away by the sun.

Joy woke up with a big smile. Her eyes were wide open and she was ready for the day’s tidings. Esmeralda was not as comfortable as Joy and Spot. She figured Joy had read more things related to this adventure than she had.

Spot opened his eyes and yawned deeply.

“Nobody bothered us last night,” he said. “It will not be a long walk to Dog Town. We might be able to get there by lunch.”

“Is it a complete city of dogs?” Joy asked.

“I have not been there in a long time. I think so,” said Spot. “The Cats set up their own town also.”

“Who is the king of The Land of Talking Animals?” asked Joy.

“There wasn’t one when I was here a long time ago,” said Spot.

They shook out their stiff legs and walked along the path again. Esmeralda wondered what time it was but her watch was still stopped.

Later in the morning, further along the trail, they began to encounter other dogs. They were approaching Dog Town. There were all kinds of dogs on the trail now. There were big ones and small ones. Some would bark at them. Others would just say hello.

Spot seemed to be smiling more. He was more upbeat. When he barked at the other dogs they also seemed to understand him. None of the dogs recognized him yet.

“Many moons,” Spot had said to describe how long he had been gone.

There was a smell that was developing.

“I am used to this,” said Esmeralda.

“There are so many different breeds here though,” said Joy with a smile.

By noon there were a bunch of hills and then a valley with a city. They now looked out over Dog Town which had rivers that ran through it. There were not a lot of structures in the town. There were no bricks or bridges. Some dogs had made shelters for themselves.

“What about when it gets cold?” Joy asked Spot.

“We don’t have winters here,” said Spot. “There is something I need to tell you.”

Spot had been conversing with the dogs as they were on their way. There had been some dialogue back and forth. Spot seemed now more apprised of what was happening down in the valley.

“I must leave you. I am also needed here,” Spot said.

“What is going on?” asked Esmeralda.

Joy was now paying close attention.

“The dogs I met along the trail were very surprised to find someone who had been to your world. It had been a long time for them. We were happy to have a passage to your world because we could hide and explore there. We could have adventures among your kind. We could learn from you. It is tough not being able to build a house for example,” said Spot.

“Do you mean there is nothing here that can build a house?” said Joy.

“We thought about inviting people here, but it was not clear that we could defend ourselves. We sent forth ambassadors to your world because we needed help, but we became afraid to reveal ourselves.”

“How did you link with our world?”

“We also had magicians. Not everything here is a canine. Most of us, though, are limited by not being able to have two usable hands to build with. Some of us don’t have useful thumbs even.”

“Why must you stay?” asked Esmeralda beginning to cry.

“It is necessary now for me to tell the others of your world. Most of the animals we have encountered have never seen humans before. If you stay there might be a big scandal or something. I need to stay and maybe it is best for you to go. We need to close some of the entryways. It has been an experiment that has not really worked out,” said Spot.

“What about the election?” asked Joy.

“That is not important right now, but it is why I must stay. I will need to tell them of your world. I am afraid they might not be friendly. There are so many of them.”

Esmeralda now thought of all the different kinds of dogs they had seen on the trail. They were all shapes and sizes. They had used their own language with Spot. A tear was now in her eye. It appears that they had decided to be exclusionists.

“I belong among them. You are not in

immediate danger, but they have heard some stories about people hurting other animals. They might not all listen to me. I will take you to the gate tonight when the Fire Flies are out.”

“That’s the best thing to do,” said a Cardinal that had been listening while she sat on a nearby bush.

“Sorry that you have to go,” said Spot.

“I would have liked to see The City of Cats,” said Joy.

“They don’t like us Dogs very much,” said Spot.

“Are there other cities?” asked Joy.

“Most animals have decided to live among their own kind, but we talk and visit each other. There are a few towns that the animals share, but it is not clear if things have worked out in those situations. There is peace despite the Anarchy. Your kind might be able to learn something from us and this account.”

They spent the night on the hill above Dog Town. Some animals came to look at them. Some even chatted a little. These were all things that Esmeralda and Joy recognized. The sunset that night was otherworldly. The sky was partly cloudy and many of the clouds were painted pink and purple in the sky.

There were Fire Flies in this land also. When they came out Spot led them to the gate.

“What should I tell mom and dad about you?” asked Esmeralda.

“Tell them that I got lost in the park?” said Spot.

“What if they go looking for you?”

“I might return, but I don’t know now. This might be a goodbye. I am pretty old, Esmeralda. They may need me here,” said Spot.

Esmeralda eyes grew misty.

“You will find other friends,” said Spot.

“Thank you Spot,” said Esmeralda.

“Thank you also. This was a dream come true,” said Joy who now turned sad.

The Fire Flies had gathered in the twilight and they could now hear music beyond the gate that was not visible on the other side.

“So long,” said Spot a little impatiently and sad.

Esmeralda and Joy waved and then walked into the gate and the music. The time had only changed a few minutes. There would be other animals that they could be friends with. They would have to look for them.

Editorial: This Issue

In this issue, we welcome some new writers with a variety of tastes and techniques. Several authors are publishing with us for the first time. Justin Lyons presents a new version of Norse Myth with an implied commentary on the relationship between art and life. A. A. Azariah -Kribbs offers a fairy-tale with romance (in the best sense). Marina Favila has composed the tale of a beautifully ghostly holiday. Bethany Abrahamson reconsiders fairy-bridegroom, reversing genders involving a familiar motif. Shane Blackman gives us a sonnet expressing appreciation for Narnia and its impact on life as he knows it. B. L. Blackwood's two poems show technologically advanced civilizations in outer space, still clothed with mythology. In J. R. Alfieri's tale, a mysterious door and a hidden river offer tests and perhaps benefits to the protagonist. Simon Perchik's poem, "This Rock," shows us many directions in which half understood works can lead us.

We also welcome back some previous authors. Trent Walters, a long time contributor, and sometime acting-editor of *Mythic Circle*, presents five "Moonstory

Poems" loosely based on Inuit tales, full of vivid imagery, action and puns. Ryder Miller, in his "The Land of Talking Animals," depicts a passage between two worlds, both undergoing political upheaval. Lee Clark Zumpe explores the consequences of yet one more attempt to rid the world of evil in "Rime of the Last Wurm." Ron Boyer gives us three poems reflecting a bard's link with nature.

For the front cover, Emily Metcalf contributes a cover inspired by "The Wooing of Doorley." For additional illustrations, Bethany Abrahamson gives a dragon picture for "Rime of the Last Wurm" and her own image of an imaginary animal, the Owlbear, for the back cover.