



Why the Hippo Calls Canada Home

If you travel to Canada, you will see many special Canadian sights. You will see her great cities of steel and glass. You will see the vast prairie grasslands, rippling in the breeze. You will see her fleet of fishing boats. The Canadian Mounties, in their bright red coats. The majestic, snow-capped Canadian Rockies.

And just as typically, you will see the herds of Canadian hippopotami, meandering through the wetlands, alongside the moose and elk. The graceful aquatic hippos, braving the mighty falls at Niagara. The shaggy-coated woolly hippos of the Great North, blinking away the ice and snow.

They seem every bit as Canadian as snowshoes. But many people do not realize that the hippopotamus is not native to Canada. Indeed, it did not even come to our fair land until recently. This is the story of how the hippos came to Canada.

Mtumba was a creature of the blue river. She and her parents and the entire shiny black race of river creatures dwelt among

the reeds and grasses of the Upper Nile.

They were large creatures. Grown adults weighed a ton, two tons, or even more. Their skin was taut and unwrinkled, as if they were inflated with air, like big black shiny tires.

The hippos were mild-mannered. They had no enemies, though occasionally a crocodile or a hyena would make off with a little one. Sometimes hippos fought with one another. Two old bulls would occasionally argue about one thing or another, and they would clap their enormous mouths at each other.

Sometimes they really hurt one another. Mtumba would wince and duck beneath the muddy water, but usually nothing ever came of it.

The days were long, and the sun was hot. But Mtumba and her parents kept cool by remaining in the water, rolling and bounding along the muddy bottom. Mtumba liked to chase after her mother, holding onto her tail with her teeth, up and down through the muddy surging river. Although awkward on land, in the water they danced and glided like slow-motion blimps in a kind of bratwurst ballet.

Mtumba liked to lie in the water and spin round and round, until she stopped. Then, when she stopped spinning, she liked to lie perfectly still in the water and feel the bubbles collect along the length of her rubbery body. One by one, the bubbles rose from her. When they rose to the surface they made a funny, underwater burbling noise, and Mtumba could feel each one tickle, and a little shiver up and down her back.

At night the hippos climbed up out of the river and roamed the riverbanks under the full yellow moon, munching on pears, roots, and fresh green leaves. When she was happy, and her belly was full, she would wiggle her stubby little tail around in a circle, like a propeller. It was a sweet life for Mtumba and her family.

And then she met Mobutu.

Mobutu was from a family farther up the river, who wandered down her way when the rains did not come and the mud became too thick. When she first saw Mobutu she did not think much of him. Mtumba's mother called them "upriver people" -- not a flattering thing, to be sure.

But Mtumba loved to watch Mobutu take running jumps off the riverbanks. His supple black body seemed suspended in the air, for a milisecond anyway, before galumphing into the muddy water. When he surfaced again, and buckets of water came rusjing back out between his peg teeth, she saw a light in his eyes that reminded her of her own, brimming with determination to live a life. She liked that.

In the spring of her third year, Mtumba and Mobutu spent every day playing in the swirling waters, diving deep down, surfacing, snorting, and laughing at the sight of each other. They would loll in the rushes in the cool of the evening, discussing the grass, and the fish, and the clouds passing overhead. Without ever thinking about it, they had become friends for life, and each knew life without the other was impossible.

And then the hunter came.

The hunter was not a bad man, exactly. He did not come to kill hippos, as other hunters did. Mtumba had heard that poachers sometimes killed a full-grown hippo just to make umbrella-stands of the legs. Other hunters killed hippos for their ivory teeth, which were then carved into false teeth for people.

But this hunter did not even have a gun. He stood behind a blind of palm fronds all day, watching them through binoculars. Mtumba's mother warned her to stay away, that humans were bad business, even the ones without guns.

That night, when the hippos rose up out of the river for their evening stroll, Mtumba found a healthy euphorbia plant and was plucking the juicy leaves off, one by one, with her lips. She did not hear as three men tiptoed behind her, threw a blanket over her head, flipped her on her back and dragged her away, crying out for her mother, from the riverbank to the campsite of the hunter.

Mtumba never saw her mother or Mobutu again.

Mtumba was herded by three men through the jungle, for several miles. Above her the monkeys sang to her, telling her they were sorry for her. Mtumba rolled her eyes upward at her friends, and a single large teardrop formed, and dribbled down her face.

Mtumba was led up the gangplank of a river boat, and led down again into the hold of the boat, where she stayed for several days as the riverboat made its way down river. In the port city she could hear the shouts and cries of the bazaar. The people were buying and selling-- bananas, sugar, rice, and now, Mtumba.

Mtumba was placed in a wooden crate and shipped by truck to the airport. There she was pulled on rollers into an airplane. The airplane took off, and in the roar and vibration Mtumba took her first rest in days. In the dark roar of the airplane, Mtumba dreamed of the warm waters of home, of her family and friends, and the taste of green grass in her mouth.

Mtumba was awakened to the opening freight door of the airplane. She was transferred to another truck, and rode in the back half a day. When the door opened, she found herself in a strange kind of city. Located next to a huge lake, it reminded her of home. She smelled the scent of fish from the water, and many animals on the land. Many of the scents were familiar to her, a few were not. She was in a zoo.

Mtumba was given a cage in a tiled barn called the pachyderm house. It was a dank, smelly place. They fed her hay and some kind of biscuit made from cereals. It was not too bad, but the hay was nowhere near as fresh and delicious as the grasses that grew alongside her native river. And the biscuits were the same, day in and day out. Her keepers called her Ethel.

The scenery around her did not change, either. She spent her nights and mornings in a tiled room, with bars on one side. People would walk past her all day long. They would laugh. The little ones would run back to bring their parents, then point at her. Everyone always laughed. She looked out at them, hoping for some expression of understanding, or sympathy.

People only laughed, and threw things. Popcorn, paper bags and cartons. Banana peels. Apple cores. Human beings seemed like decent creatures. Perhaps, however, they did not have the depth of feeling of others. It wasn't their fault -- it was just the way they were.

Beside her was a pair of black rhinoceroses that the handlers called Roscoe and Myra. She knew that was not their real names, but as she did not speak rhinoceros, she was unable to learn who they really were. They seemed nice, although a little settled down for Mtumba, who was still young and anxious for some kind of excitement.

In a pool across from Mtumba was a group of crocodiles and alligators. Mtumba could not understand the alligators, but she knew what the crocodiles were thinking. They were not very bright, and they did not have much to say. But every so often it was fun to have a word or two with them. One old crocodile had an name that was unpronounceable. It went something like Kraaaaaaak. Though not exactly kindly, she was a tolerant creature, and she was an honest one.

On the other side were three elephants, one of them from Africa. Her name was Zapiti, and Mtumba could talk to Zapiti. Zapiti ached for the grassy savannas and the tall trees she could break with her tusks. Here there was only bricks and steel bars. Some days Zapiti would spend rocking back and forth, shifting the weight from one foot to the next, in an endless see-saw rhythm.

The other animals said Zapiti was crazy, but really she was just homesick. The two Asian elephants seemed calmer than Zapiti, but Mtumba could not understand what they said. But she could guess. They were saying that creatures in captivity all became a little strange over time. As well as the zookeepers treated them, animals want to be home, to be free.

Mtumba did not plan on being alone, however. She was carrying a secret inside her -- a baby, Mobutu's baby. Mtumba was able to bear the homesickness because she knew that she was not alone. Soon, she would give birth to a little one with a face like her own -- someone to love and to call her own.

She did not tell anyone her secret. But one day the old crocodile said to her, Mtumba, you are with child, aren't you? Mtumba waddled over to the old lizard and said that yes, she was.

I am sad for you, said the old crocodile.

Sad? Mtumba asked. How could her greatest happiness be sad?

Because, the old crocodile said, the zoo often sells our young to other zoos. You see Zapiti over there, always swinging her head to and fro? She did not do that until they took away her calf.

Mtumba felt fear grip her. She knew she could never be happy at the zoo alone. Worse, she would never see her baby again, never know if he were happy, or safe, or being cared for. It was terrible to be taken from her home and family. She could not bear to have her baby taken from her, too.

One night, Mtumba lay in the corner of her pen. Her time had come, but she was determined not to make a sound. She gave birth to a baby son late in the night, a 275-pound baby boy. As Mtumba gazed into his shiny blinking eyes, she knew where she had seen that look before that expression of determination -- it was the face of her beloved Mobutu.

Mother and child rested for a couple of hours. Then, summoning her strength, she leaned into the brick wall that had enclosed her through the summer. She pitted the weight of her body, a good 3800 pounds of muscle, against the spot she had decided was weakest. For weeks she had been worrying this spot, seeming to scratch herself against it, in the same sing-song rhythm of Zapiti next door. Caretakers whispered that Ethel was going crazy, just like the African elephant. They were satisfied that she was adjusting. But all that time, she had been plotting her getaway.

Bit by bit she heard the scraping sound of brick against brick, that told her that success was possible. When the wall said no, her heart said yes, and she thought of her new baby, whom she had decided would be Kiboko, and of Mobutu, and her mother back in the warm rivers of the Upper Nile.

Finally, with one enormous push, she broke through the wall, rushing through it like a nose guard, sending a crack through

fifty feet long down the length of the wall. A few loose bricks fell and hit her on the head, but, they didn't do much.

Mtumba led the toddling calf Kiboko through the wall, across the yard, down the brick pathway, across a parking lot, and into the cold waters of Lake Ontario. Kiboko held onto his mother's stubby tail with his maw, while Mtumba paddled slowly, slowly, slowly across the harbor and beyond the breakwater, and out into the open water of the great lake.

The zoo dispatched a coast guard cutter to intercept the escaping animals, but it was dark, and naturalists assured police that no animal could swim across forty miles of open water, in the dark, and survive. In any event, police already had their hands full, as Zapiti and the other two elephants, the rhinoceros couple, and three crocodiles and had their escape along with Mtumba, in other directions.

This happened in the spring of 1929, in the place known as Buffalo, New York. When alerted, Canadian authorities promised to keep a lookout for the runaway hippos. But as word spread, people began to object. What are we, the dogcatchers of the Yankees, Canadians asked? Parliament met to debate the issue. While game wardens and customs officers watched on, legislators worked to decide whether Mtumba and Kiboko were in fact runaway property, or whether they were not in fact political refugees, seeking sanctuary in the land to the north.

In the end, Mtumba won, in so small part because of the reluctance of the good people of Canada to pass up a chance to make the United States look like jerks. But Canada did not stop there. The government decreed that henceforth the hippopotamus was a free agent throughout the provinces and northern territories of that country, and could pass unhindered wherever it may choose to go. Two hippos from Canadian zoos-- Elmer in Vancouver, Buddy in Toronto, and Delores in Montreal, were freed, and escorted to a breeding ground on the prairies of Saskatchewan, where they joined Mtumba and Kiboko in freedom.

Mtumba's journey is a landmark event in the history of

Canada. It explains the statute of a baby hippo, with a maple leaf emblazoned on its brow, on the lawn in front of the City Hall in downtown Ottawa. It explains the face of Mtumba on the \$500 dollar bill issued by the government since 1948, and the 21 cent first class postage stamp featuring the faces of both Mtumba and Kiboko. If Canada meant freedom to the hippo, the hippo meant identity and character to Canadians everywhere.

The hippos of Canada came to be called the people of Kiboko. But none forgot the heroic escape of Mtumba, and all have honored her memory in the days since.

Mtumba and Kiboko and the other hippos lived happily ever after, and prospered, under the endless skies of western Canada. Winters were cold, but the creatures adapted, some growing their hair long, others spending the long months of winter inside the compound built for their comfort.

And in the summer, they swam in prairie lakes, and it was as if nothing had changed. All the hippos lolled in the sun, and turned their bodies slowly in the waters, feeling the bubbles rise from their skin, as Kiboko had done many years before, in the muddy waters of the Nile.