

LADY WHITE AND BLANCHE

Annabelle peeked into the Kessler mansion's guest suite and her mouth fell open with awe. On top of a mountain of luggage, a huge wooden Noah's ark lay open on its side, most of its contents having tumbled into a heap on the floor.

"Kayla, come quick!" she whispered. "And *shhh*, I don't want to wake them up!"

"Wow!" said Kayla. "That's a lot of company. Must be every stuffed animal in existence. But why are they all asleep?"

"Erin and Juliet and their two kids just travelled all the way from Europe," said Annabelle. "This is their time for sleeping ... they call it jetlag."

"It's to do with their *body clocks*," she added with authority. "Apparently."

"Not for me it isn't," a voice hooted, followed by the flutter of wings, and a bird flew out of the ark. "Name's Ollie—Ollie the hoot owl."

"Hello," said the dollies, graciously shaking the extended wing.

"It's okay for them," the owl continued. "They can shut their eyes and go to sleep whatever time, day or night. They don't give a hoot. But I'm supposed to hoot and stay awake in the night and sleep during the day. Now the schedule is such that I'm awake during the day like all the rest. It's going to play *havoc* with my wisdom requirements."

"Oh dear," said Annabelle. "Why is that?"

"You see, I require the utmost quiet of the night in order to listen. We've only been here a few hours, and with all the clatter and clutter of the daytime going on, I can hardly hear myself *think*."



“Hmmm,” Annabelle said pensively. “We’re going to have to do something about that. Maybe we can ask Angela for some advice. She’s always making sure that we get our time to be quiet and still, even if the day turns out to be a bit hectic due to a change in the routine.”

“Well,” said Ollie. “My routine has certainly been thrown out of whack. Sleeping at night? What wise owl in his right mind would ever do such a thing?”

“I think I know what you mean,” said a voice behind them.

“Hi, Bruno,” said Annabelle. “This is Ollie.”

“Hope you don’t mind me butting in,” said Bruno. “But me—being a bear—since coming to the tropics, I can’t look forward to my winter hibernation like I used to. It’s a bummer.”

“Now, now, Bruno,” said Kayla. “Remember not to grumble.”

“Yup. Sorry ‘bout that. But if you ever want to talk about it, Ollie, I’ll be happy to give you some advice.”

“Thanks, if ever I’m up in the daytime and need some company, I’ll know who to come to,” said Ollie.

There was stirring in the heap, and a soft voice asked who Ollie was talking to.

“A bear and a couple of dolly neighbours from the next bedroom,” Ollie replied. “Come out and meet them.”

At this suggestion, a snow-white female polar bear cub with a pink bow around her neck appeared. Bruno caught his breath and gulped as his eyes popped out of his head.

“Hello,” the polar bear said bashfully. “My name is Blanche White. I’m the daughter of Lady Constance White.”

“Hello, Blanche. I’m Annabelle.”

“Kayla.”

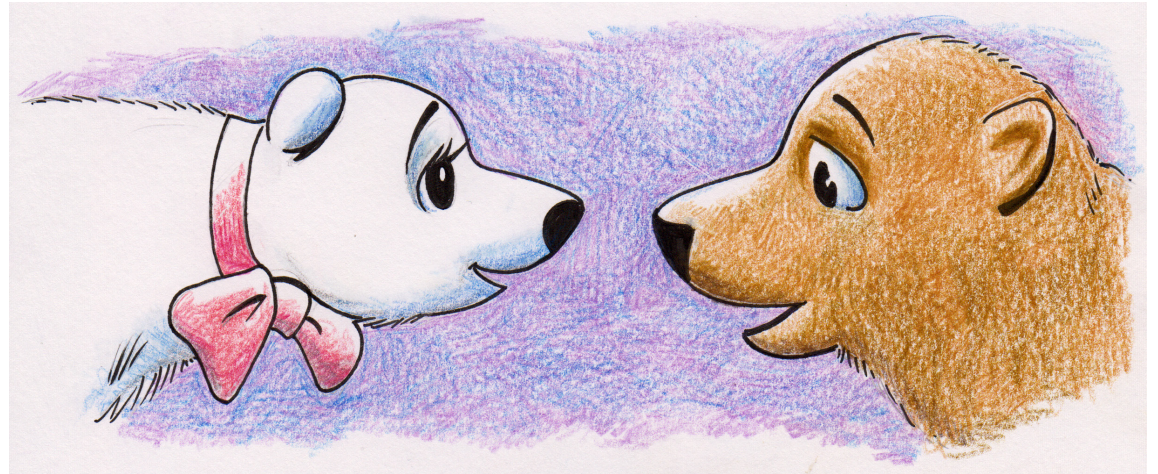


“B ... B ... B ... Bruno.”

“Annabelle! Kayla! I notice you haven’t straightened up the dollhouse all day!”

“It’s Angela,” said Kayla. “We have to go. It’s been nice talking to you, Ollie, and to you too, Blanche. We hope you all can get onto the right schedule soon.”

“Thank you,” said Ollie. “Anyway, I suppose if I do some vigorous fly about, maybe I’ll get myself good and tired so I can sleep today.”



With a hoot, Ollie took flight out of the window, leaving Bruno staring speechless into Blanche’s sparkling eyes.

“You know what?” the polar bear cub whispered with a mischievous grin. “In that bag right there is something that tastes so good you won’t believe it.”

“Honey?”

“Of course not. Every bear eats honey.”

“Syrup?”

Blanche shook her head. “Uh, uh. Even better. Come.”

Bruno clambered with her into a duffle bag that was leaning open against the wall.

“Taste this,” said Blanche, reaching out her paw after screwing the cap off a large jar.

“Mmmm,” said Bruno, licking his lips.

Blanche smiled. “Good, isn’t it?”

“Yup,” said Bruno, dipping his paw again into the thick, dark brown liquid. “What is it?”

“Treacle.”

“Never heard of it.”

"It's ever so common in Northern Europe," said Blanche. "Careful, you're dripping it all over the other things in this bag."

"Blanche! What on earth are you doing?"

Blanche gasped as she and Bruno looked up at the angry face of a full-grown female polar bear.

"M-Mummy! I thought you were sleeping."

"You're making a terrible mess. Erin and Juliet are going to be furious. And who is this?"

"His name's Bruno. He's a bear, too."

"I can see that," the mother growled. "But he's a brown bear."

"Is that a problem, Mummy?"

"No daughter of mine is going to be hanging around with a brown bear."

"But, Mummy, we only just met and he's ever so nice."

"I don't want to hear it. Get out of that bag at once, wipe off your paws, and say goodbye to your brown friend."

In tears, Blanche clambered out of the bag, waved to Bruno as he left the room, and followed her mother into the ark.



A couple of raps sounded on Puppendorf's bedroom door, and before anyone had a chance to say "come in," the door flew open and in strode Lady Constance White clutching a small piece of paper which she shook in Annabelle's face.

"Do you know what this is?" Lady White demanded.

"A piece of paper?" said Annabelle with a trace of dumb insolence that drew stifled guffaws from the other members of Puppendorf.

"What's the commotion?" Angela drowsily asked. "It's nap time, and I'm really tired."

"I take it you are in charge of this dump," said Lady White. "So I suppose I should take this issue up with you."

"What issue?"

"Read this."

Angela took the note, read it and smiled. "Sweet," she said.

"*Sweet?*" Lady White thundered.

"*Shhh*," Angela whispered. "Some of us are trying to nap. Yes, sweet."

"A drippy love note from your brown bear acquaintance to my Blanche is *sweet?*"

"It's not exactly a love note," said Angela. "All he's saying is how much he appreciates her company and would like to spend more time with her."



“Then what are the Xs and this big heart doing at the end?”

“Those are kisses and the heart is like...”

“Precisely. I call that a love note. He doesn’t know what love is. And where is he, by the way?”

“Bruno is probably taking a nap out in the Magic Forest,” said Angela. “He prefers it out there.”

“Actually, I think it’s sweet that he and Blanche could be friends, ma’am,” Doris interjected. “He has been rather lonely lately.”

“Lonely,” grunted Lady White. “He doesn’t know what loneliness is.”

“May I ask why you are so against Bruno having anything to do with Blanche?” Angela inquired.

“Because he’s brown and of a low social rank, and my daughter is purebred white polar bear. It would never do.”

“Why not?” said Priscilla. “There’s a couple who live down the road, Catherine and Edgar; she’s white and he’s brown. They are ever so nice.”

“And they truly love each other,” Angela added.

“Hmmp. But supposing Blanche marries your Bruno and they have cubs?” said Lady White. “That’s the end of our white stock.”

“Would it be such a big deal if they weren’t white?” Doris asked

Lady White huffed and snatched the note from Angela’s hand. “I want it firmly understood that I am against any further association of my daughter with your brown bear friend. That’s final.”

So saying, Lady Constance White stormed out, slamming the door behind her.



“The Bimbos have gone to a lot of trouble to prepare a nice low-fat supper for us, Bruno,” Angela said, as she and the members of Puppendorf squatted around the tea set in front of the Bimbo bungalow. “Maybe it’s not to your liking, but at least you can be cheerful.”

“Yes,” said Barbara Bimbo. “You’ve been moping around quite a bit these last couple of days. Do you have a sore head?”

Bruno shook it in response.

“Have you not been getting enough sleep?” Beverly asked.

“He’s been getting plenty,” said Kayla. “I think I know what it is.”

“Don’t say it,” said Annabelle. “Let me guess. ... Is it Blanche?”

Bruno lowered his head and said nothing.

“Who’s Blanche?” Barbara asked.

“The daughter of Lady Constance White, the polar bear.”

“Ohhh. Coming up in the world, I see,” said Beverly. “She’s pretty, if not a little on the chunky side.”

“We can work with her on that,” said Barbara.

“Bears are supposed to be chunky,” said Angela. “Unless they’re really sick.”



The door burst open, sending a wake-up call into slumbering Puppendorf; only this time, to their relief, it wasn’t Lady Constance White. It was her daughter Blanche, sobbing her eyes out. Bruno jumped out of his cardboard box. Annabelle, who had spent the night on the floor, having fallen from Priscilla’s bunk, rubbed her eyes.

"Morning, Blanche," she said sleepily. "What's up?"

"It's Mummy. She hasn't been home all night. No one knows where she is. It seems she left in the night and hasn't returned."

"Oh dear," said Annabelle.

By now, the rest of Puppendorf was wide awake and overheard the discussion.

"We could set Shumba on a hunt," said Barbara Bimbo. "He'll find her in no time."

Shumba's eyes opened widely and warily.

"I don't know about that," he said. "I've never tackled a full-grown female bear."

"Who said anything about tackling?" said Barbara. "All you have to do is *find* her. You'll do great, I know. I mean, in *Jungle King* you..."

"Or Nosey," Annabelle quickly added, noticing that Angela was getting out of her bunk bed. "*He* could try."

"I could go on a good sniff," said Nosey. "I'm sure I could ferret her out."

"Do you think she's in trouble?" Blanche asked.

"I don't know what kind of trouble she could get into around here," Barbara sarcastically said, "seeing as there are no eligible male polar bears roaming jungles."

"Really, Barbie," said Angela. "That's so out of turn."

Barbara shrugged and began languidly¹ brushing her hair.

"I'll go," Bruno said, and all eyes were upon him.

"You?" said Beverly.

"I have a good nose for other bears," he said.

"Even polar bears?" Blanche asked.

Bruno slowly moved his head from side to side. "I think so. If not, I can pray to find her."

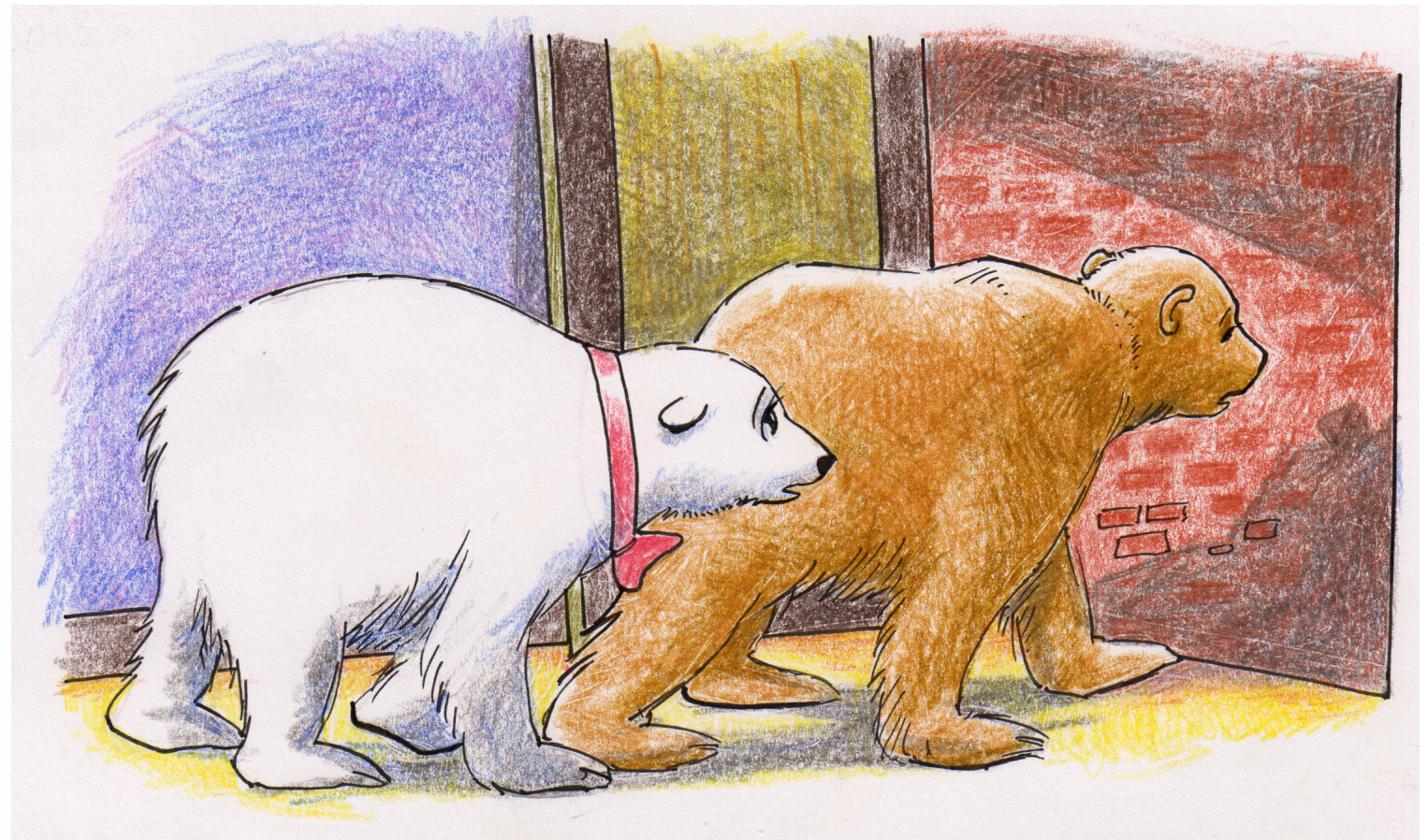
"Good for you," said Angela. "It's better than relying on your own smartness. You've got the job."

With an exhilarated smile, Bruno drew in his breath and let his chest expand. Then, after thrusting out his forearm in invitation to Blanche, who thrust a trusting paw into his, Bruno and she ambled out of the bedroom and on to their mission.

"Where are we going?" Blanche inquired as they descended the steps to the cellar.

Bruno suddenly sniffed the air. "I have a feeling ... it's *bear*, all right. But it's mixed with something else."

"It's dark down here," Blanche nervously remarked, and clung to Bruno.



“Don’t worry. It’s only the cellar. This is where the male humans do their fix-it and handyman jobs. They store a lot of tools and supplies here.”

“But what would Mummy be doing down here?”

Bruno shrugged and kept sniffing. “There!” he said suddenly, and lumbered towards the corner. “Isn’t that the huge treacle jar that was in that bag?”

Blanche nodded. “It looks like treacle,” she said, sniffing at a cluster of brown globs on the floor surrounding it. “But it certainly doesn’t smell like it.”

Suddenly the cellar light switched on and Bruno and Blanche ducked behind a sack of cement.

“So you grab that there jar of creosote,” an older man’s voice said. “And I’ll make sure them there brushes are clean.”

“Sure,” said another, who sounded younger. “Hey! Looks like one of the kids dropped a teddy bear in here!”

“Oh no!” Blanche whispered. “It’s *Mummy!*”

“It’s been totally ruined,” the younger man continued. “I’ll chuck it in the trash.”

Blanche burst into tears, and Bruno motioned her to stifle her sobs.

“Just leave it by that there door,” the older man said as he ascended the steps. “We can take care of it later. We need to finish painting that fence today.”

Once the men’s voices had disappeared, Bruno and Blanche hastened over to the dazed Lady White, who acknowledged them with a faint smile.

“Oh, Mummy! You’re drenched in that awful stuff. What happened?”

“You can tell us later, ma’am,” said Bruno, lifting her onto his back. “Cos we need to get you out of here.”

“Oh dear,” Lady White whispered hoarsely. “I do hope I don’t have to go into one of those infernal washing machines. It’s torture.”

“Well, it’s better than being thrown out in the trash, Mummy,” said Blanche. “Thank God you were found. You could have even *drowned.*”



With most of the members of Puppendorf present to watch the operation, Lady Constance White complained about the foaming shampoo suds stinging her eyes as Priscilla patiently tried to scrub the remains of the creosote from her fur.

“And you’re not going to hang me up with a clothes peg on the laundry line to dry me out, are you?” Lady White pleaded. “Before we came here, the humans did that to me after they threw me in the washing machine. It’s like being *tortured* or something.”

“It may not be necessary if we can just dry you with a towel,” Priscilla calmly said.

“But don’t you have a tag that says ‘machine washable’ or something like that?” Bruno asked.

“I did,” Lady White replied, “and I had Blanche cut it off. I didn’t want to give those humans any ideas. The problem was they went and did it anyway.”

"Well, if we're faithful to wash every day," said Annabelle. "We can avoid a major deal like that."

"I keep my white fur spotless, I'll have you know," said Lady White. "It's an absolute reproach for a polar bear to be sullied, as I've had to remind my Blanche here on many an occasion when she neglects her hygiene."

"Mummy," groaned Blanche.

"Anyway, we've got most of it out," said Doris, after vigorously towelling off the distraught bear. "But it looks as though you're going to have to remain brown until it wears off."

"Oh my goodness!" Lady White gasped. "*Brown?*"

"I'm sorry, but it's the best we can do," said Angela. "It's a nice shade of light brown, though."

"It actually looks quite becoming, if you ask me," said Bruno. "Lord White would like it, I'm sure."

"Lord White will never see it," Lady White said with curt sadness.

"That creosote stuff is strong," Angela said to break the uncomfortable silence that followed. "What did you think it was again?"

"Treacle," Lady White sheepishly replied.

"What's that?" Doris asked.

"A kind of molasses ... like a dark syrup type thing," said Priscilla.

"Whatever it is," said Annabelle. "It tastes ever so good, *apparently*. Right?"

Lady White nodded.



Following a tap on the Puppendorf bedroom door and an invitation to come in, the door slowly opened. It was Lady Constance White.

"Is this a good time? Am I disturbing?"

"No, no, no, not at all," said Angela, putting down a magazine and getting up from her chair in the corner. "Everyone's asleep. We'll have to whisper."

"Anyway," said Lady White, after she and Angela had exchanged small talk on the day's events. "I must confess that my creosote trauma has taught me a good many life lessons. Or, in modern vernacular, has been a 'wake-up call.'"

Angela nodded.

"You see," her visitor continued. "I misjudged dear Bruno. He's a precious soul. His bearing and deportment during this ordeal was nothing short of admirable. An effort worthy of distinction."



Tears came to Lady White's eyes. "Clarence ... er ... Lord White would be ever so proud, and I am confident that he would have given his full ... er ... blessing on my daughter and young Bruno's association."



"I am sure of that," said Lady White. "Please do convey to him the best of my wishes, together with my apologies."

"I most certainly will, ma'am. And you, of course, are welcome to join us at our tea parties, where there will be plenty of treacle courtesy of Erin and Juliet."

"That's ever so nice of you, ma'am," Angela said, handing her a tissue.

"So I do want to reiterate that I am in full agreement and hereby give my consent to Blanche and Bruno continuing their friendship. And Bruno is welcome anytime to join us and to participate in any activity that should take place in the ark."

"Thank you, ma'am," said Angela. "You don't know how much this will mean to Bruno. He's been one of our most dependable members of Puppendorf."

