

-Prologue-

Murray stood back in amazement, looking at the intricate playground he had finally completed building. It had every piece of equipment that a child could imagine – swings, a slide, monkey bars, a merry-go-round, a see-saw and a sandpit. The playground went further than the eye could see; it was high like a skyscraper and was colourful. Each colour in the playground shone brightly, emitting a glow. It looked like an artist's palette, with a rainbow of colours splattered across it. Murray built it by himself – a primary school hired him to build the playground for all the children. It was his masterpiece.

Murray packed up his tools, slid his hammer into his tool belt and was about to walk towards his car, but a large creature stood in his path. It was some sort of furry creature, with big ears, scales that crowned his head, green piercing eyes, tusks that curved out from his mouth, and he was as big as a lion. Murray jumped back, astonished at the thing that stood there. He had never seen a bunyip before.

“Hello there,” he knelt down and said, “I’m Murray. Nice to meet you. What’s your name?”

The bunyip looked at him, lovingly, yet somewhat confused. Murray smiled at him.

“Of course you don’t have a name! I’ll call you... uh... Mr Bunyip. Yes, it suits you very well,” Murray chuckled, “Would you like to follow me around here? I’m a builder – I built this playground. Where do you come from?”

It was as if the bunyip appeared when the playground was being constructed. Of course, Murray had no idea how this creature came here, or why. The animal just stared at him – did he really expect him to speak back in English?

Murray chuckled, “Oh, I forgot. Animals don’t talk! Well buddy, I assume you don’t have a home. Would you like to live here?”

Bunyip waddled towards the sandpit, and plopped himself down, making himself feel at home.

Chapter One

-An Unresponsive Friend and an Untouched Pie-

Murray arrived at the small public primary school relatively early in the morning and parked his car in the parking space allocated for the school's Head of Building and Maintenance. He slowly gathered all of his tools that were rolling around in the trunk of his car and wrapped them around him in his tool belt.

With posture fitting to an old man, he trudged across the school grounds to drop off all remaining tools to his small office cubical. Before even thinking about any other daily chore the school had set for him that day, he smiled to himself as he went to visit his masterpiece - a playground that the school requested he build several years ago. It was truly a work of art in every sense of the word, and it was the most beautiful, innovative structure the school owned. There were more colours and vibrancies than what the human eye knew what to do with, and it made even the passing adults stop to stare in amazement.

At least, that's what it used to be. Now, as Murray made his way over to the playground empty of all

children, he found himself thinking about how full of life it used to be and how children were no longer pushing through each other just to enter it. The colours that used to leap off the poles now appeared to be completely gone, the playground truly sitting in a state of black and white emptiness.

Just as Murray approached the forgotten playground, a small purr could be heard from the sand pit. “Hello, buddy,” Murray replied lovingly. “Ready to go do our daily rounds together?”

Bunyip didn’t respond; he only continued to lie in the same spot without even lifting his head. “Bunyip?” Murray gently bent down to eye level with his best friend and softly stroked his head. “I’m so sorry, but there isn’t anything I can do about it. I know that you’re upset and lonely, but you still have me. You will *always* have me. Doesn’t that count for something?”

Bunyip still lay motionless. “I know that the children don’t visit anymore, and I really understand. But I’m still here, okay? I will *always* want you around.” Bunyip seemed to sink further into the sand, looking a sickly brown, instead of his normal light grey. He continued to ignore Murray’s desperate attempts to connect with his gentle friend.

“Okay, I think I know what you want.” Murray reached into his bag and pulled a leftover slice of his beef pie out of his lunch box. “I was going to eat this for lunch, but I can find something else for me if this will cheer you up.”

Bunyip purred softly, but made no effort to retrieve the generously offered slice of pie. “Come on, friend, it really is **delicious**. My wife, Mabel, made it, and it even came 1st place in the Annual Pie Competition!” Murray said in desperation to help Bunyip. Nothing happened and Murray started to wonder if he was alright. This had been going on for a little while, gradually getting worse each day they saw each other. Murray had tried everything to make him feel better, but that had been the first day that Bunyip wouldn’t walk around the school grounds with him or respond whenever Murray spoke. Murray knew it was the school’s new method of teaching, the screens of their computers constantly stealing the student’s attention, which had stopped them from wanting to use the playground. However, he had no idea it would be this bad for Bunyip. “Well, I will leave this for you here,” Murray explained as he lay down the pie. “I’ll just be around. They want me to fix the light in one of

the classrooms; they said that it won't stop flickering and it causes 'a rather horrid glare on the laptop screens'." Murray stooped down slowly to give Bunyip a gentle pat on the head and then walked off, leaving his unresponsive friend with the untouched pie.

Murray sat quietly in his small office cubical on the other side of the school for his lunch break. As he was filling out paperwork, the phone on his desk rang.
"Hello, this is Murray."

"Yes, Murray, this is Janet, Head of the School. I have a few questions about your playground that you built," the lady on the other end of the phone stated blatantly.

"I, uh, know who you are. I have been working here for quite a while now, miss," Murray replied, unsure of what Janet wanted.

"The playground you built is deteriorating. It's fading and it isn't, to be frank, good anymore. We need you to either fix it or build another."

"What...? It's not that bad..." Murray was interrupted.

"We haven't forgotten your retirement is scheduled for not long from now, but *we still own you!* After this one last job you can leave as soon as you'd

like, alright? Thanks!" Janet stated passive-aggressively, hanging up just as quickly as she had rung, leaving Murray very confused. He started scratching his head, but decided to ignore her until after he had finished his lunch and gone to visit Bunyip again.

Murray once again approached the playground as he did on a daily basis, and saw his friend lying in the same spot where he had left him. As soon as he came closer, Bunyip raised his head, taking Murray by very happy surprise. He was hopeful that maybe his friend was going to feel better after all, and all he needed was a little bit of time to get over his loneliness. Bunyip's eyes immediately narrowed as he seemed to be focused on something at the other end of the playground, and Murray tried to follow his gaze and pin-point what he was looking at.

After several seconds of confusion, Murray could finally see what was capturing his friend's attention; a small spotlight of the playground was once again enveloped in its encapsulating array of colours.

Chapter Two

-A Ray of Hope-

Now that Murray had a proper look, he realized that it wasn't just a soft glow. It was a young woman, who was surrounded by her own bubble of colours, distinctly contrasting against the monochromatic playground. She had striking green eyes with wavy black hair spilling out of a headscarf that matched her long and flowing dress. All her clothing's colours were as bright and intense as the sun. She also had large golden bangles that clanged whenever she moved. She didn't take any notice of them whilst hauling a large bag. Beside Murray, Bunyip was still staring as he struggled to get to his feet. He hobbled towards her, shaking and unsteady.

As Bunyip got closer to her, he got stronger with every step. When he bumped into her leg, she looked down and smiled. She didn't seem overly concerned by his appearance, and wasn't troubled by the fact that he looked like an odd mix of many animals. The woman knelt down and stroked his pelt, Bunyip bathing in the spectrum of colours she was emitting.

Murray carefully approached them, afraid that if he did something wrong, Bunyip would revert back to his sickly state. The woman looked up and said, “Hello, could you be a dear and point me to the art classroom?”

Murray nodded and pointed. She thanked him, grabbed the bag and turned to leave.

Bunyip’s newfound strength left him as the woman stepped away. He slumped down on the ground, whining quietly at the back of his throat.

“Oh, my, that’s not good,” she observed, “Is your friend always this frail? That can’t be healthy.”

“You notice it too? And no, Bunyip’s only recently become this weak, and he’s been getting worse every day,” replied Murray.

“Oh, then you should come with me, I think I can help you. My name’s Adara. Your friend Bunyip’s energy is being sapped away. He is in grave **danger**; especially since his spirit has been waning for so long.”

“I’m Murray. You mean to say that it’s not just that he’s missing company?” he asked. Bunyip was perking up again, soaking in the presence of Adara.

“Yes, but time is short, we must act now,” Adara said.

Murray then led Adara and Bunyip to the art classroom where Mrs Wilson was supervising the art class. Adara walked in and announced, “Hello children! I will be teaching you for the rest of the day. My name is-“

“Get out of my classroom, Gypsy!” Mrs Wilson snapped, interrupting Adara.

“My name is Adara, and I am a Gypsy, as Mrs Wilson has pointed out. Now, children, close your eyes and imagine what you would look like if you were turned into a squirrel,” continued Adara calmly. “Got it? Good. Now draw it.”

“Ms...” Mrs Wilson interjected, “we are currently writing an analysis on Van Gogh’s ‘The Starry Night’.”

“Analysis?” repeated Adara incredulously, “That’s not art! Art is for expressing yourself, to convey your feelings and show the world the previously unseen treasures you have created!”

“Ms... I must insist, we are in the middle of an extremely important analysis of Vincent van Gogh’s

‘The Starry Night’ that the students must finish, so that they can start on their next essay on Leonardo da Vinci’s ‘Mona Lisa’,” argued Mrs Wilson.

“Mrs Wilson, this is an art class. Art class is where masterpieces are created, not where works of art are analysed. I have been given permission by your school to teach your students, now please allow me to do my job!” asserted Adara.

Mrs Wilson stormed out with a huff, stopping to inform Murray that she thought Adara was completely and utterly **cracked**.

Adara wandered around the classroom, watching the students draw. After a little while, she noticed that only two people had managed to draw something, and they both drew measly stick figures. When she asked the children why they weren’t drawing anything, they replied, “We don’t have any inspiration. Can we use our phones to find some pictures?”

“If you need inspiration, let’s go outside then. And it’s ‘may I’, not ‘can I’,” said Adara, truly incensed at how badly the children’s imaginations had been stunted.

When no one moved, Adara straightened up and repeated herself, “Pens and pencils down! We’re going out! Time’s a-wasting!” She then marched out of the room as quickly as she had come in.

Chapter Three

-Technology Takeover-

The children poured outside, gadgets in hand. They groaned as they laid eyes on the dark and dull playground.

“Fără lemne, focul va muri!” shouted Adara. The children looked at her like she was crazy. Adara rushed the kids onto the equipment. A few had refused to move, so she resorted to picking them up and placing them onto the playground. She grabbed George and plonked him onto the seesaw along with Lil’ Phil. Claire was shoved up onto the slide and Abigail looked like she was going to vomit as Adara frantically pushed her around the merry-go-round. There were children dotted all around the tanbark floor.

Kids were finally on the playground, but not like Adara had imagined it. They had climbed onto the monkey bars and slides and were sitting on the swings, but they were still attached to their phones. They were taking selfies and typing away on their tiny mobile devices. The only time they looked up from their phones was to see if Adara was gone. The children

wished that they could go back to being inside the safe confines of the classroom, away from the outside world and consumed by their gadgets. It was silent apart from the assortment of ungrateful complaints and the buzzing of phones.

“This is complete and utter **nonsense**,” Adara shouted, “What happened to messing around in sandpits and playing pretend?”

She glanced to the side of the playground and approached Murray as he comforted the weak Bunyip.

“How’s he doing?”

“Not good. He hasn’t been able to move since earlier today. How about your creative escapade?”

“Far from how I imagined. These children are hopeless.”

“Why are you even doing this?”

“Can’t you see? Bunyip is weak. The kids are dull. The creativity of this school is leaving faster than the swish of a hip.” Adara looked at him, sympathetically.

“It wasn’t always this way. It used to be lively. Children would be running around and using their imaginations,” Murray sighed, “I hate that I have to leave here knowing the children will still rot their brains with these deviant devices.”

“You’re retiring?”

“Yep. I’ve been doing this for quite a few years, and it’s time to finally settle down.”

Murray looked around with sad eyes. It was obvious that he cared for the children a lot. “With my old age, I don’t think I can help these children anymore ... or Bunyip.”

“What’s even worse is that the children can’t see him anymore, because they’ve limited their imaginations. It has taken the sparkle out of their eyes. There are no ideas in their minds and the magical monster is weak and frail.” Bunyip glared at Adara after her ‘rude’ remark.

“It’s okay, buddy. She means no harm,” Murray whispered.

Suddenly, Adara’s eyes lit up as a new scheme jumped into her mind. Her striking green eyes stared straight into Murray’s.

“This isn’t going to work. But it’s okay, I’ve got another idea.”

With her bright, sunset dress flowing in the soft breeze and bangles acting as wind chimes, she settled in a ridiculous pose and shouted, “To the Art Room!”

Chapter Four

-Returning to the Roots of Creativity: One Stroke at a Time-

Adara examined the art supplies: the brushes were ancient, the bristles were frayed and the paints had lost their colourful sheen. The art room and the equipment had seen better days. The art room was dull and empty, a big contrast to the bright outdoors. The sunlight streamed into the room as if teasing the students to come out. Adara opened the windows to let the gentle breeze blow through, causing the settled dust to dance.

Adara passed out the worn out art equipment into the reluctant hands of the students. She hoped against hope that the children would see the light of this dark room and be inspired to draw what was placed on their hearts. "*Fără lemne, focul va muri,*" Adara whispered. She longed for this phrase to intertwine into the children's minds and season their ideas.

"Adara, may we use our phones to search up creative pieces of work?" a student asked, her fingers poised on her phone.

Adara shook her head, her earrings jingled and her bangles released musical noises. The students would never understand the essence of creativity if they relied on other sources. They needed to use their inner senses.

“Place your phones in this bucket. You don’t need them; use your imagination. Look around and be inspired,” Adara said passionately, passing the bucket. The students unwillingly placed their phones into the bucket.

All of the children stared at their pieces of blank paper and around the blank walls. No one moved to grasp the art materials; the children weren’t motivated.

“Adara, I can’t get inspired because I can’t see anything creative in this bare room,” one of the students complained.

Adara decided to quote a saying, “As famous artist, Degas once said, *‘Art is not what you see but what you make others see.’* Do not look around but look inside of yourselves and express that.”

The students all looked at her and as if a spell was cast upon them, they started to sketch and paint. Life

started to appear on the papers, different shades of earthly colours streaked all over their work. Fine pencil details outlined some sort of animal. Adara weaved her way through the tables; she peered over the students' shoulders to observe their work. After looking at several pieces of artwork, she noticed that each paper held some sort of creature. She looked at several others, the same animal made an appearance on the pages until she realised that every page displayed the same specimen. The animal struck a chord in her heart; the animal was a bunyip. The bunyip was a symbol of creativity.

Adara's head conjured up an image of Mr. Bunyip with a sad expression. She looked outside and saw Mr. Bunyip in his bed of sand looking happier than before. She noticed that with every flourish of a child's paintbrush, Bunyip became livelier. As the children applied their artistic flair onto the paper, the playground outside became more colourful than before. It was as if the strokes of colour in the children's palette corresponded with the playground. She then realised that Mr. Bunyip and the playground thrived when children were using their creativity. Adara's heart was weighed down by the thought of the

years that had gone by with children spending more time inside the world of technology, rather than outside.

But seeing all of the bunyip and playground drawings buoyed Adara's heavy heart with joy. She felt compelled to ask the children why they all felt obliged to draw the bunyip as their version of creativity. "Your work is unique and exquisite. What was in your mind that conjured up the image of a bunyip?" Adara asked.

"When I was younger, I saw a bunyip joyfully running while I was playing on the playground. The playground was a giant canvas where I could let my imagination run freely like a joyful bunyip," a student said and the other students chorused their agreements.

"You see, children, creativity comes from yourself, not some extraneous device. Let's go outside to the playground where your creativity will flourish," Adara said, and much to her pleasure, the children eagerly followed her out into the broad arms of the sunlight.

Adara's jewellery rung in a merry tune and the children's hearts pounded with the sound of anticipation. As they got closer to the playground, the

children walked along with Adara. She could sense their wistful feelings circulating in the atmosphere. The group stopped in their tracks; Mr. Bunyip was lying before them, radiant and happy. The playground exuded a certain light that was not evident before the art lesson. The children stared at the bunyip and Adara could see that the children were trying to reconnect to the animal that seeded their imagination and brought it to fruition.

Chapter Five

-Leaving the Playground in Good Hands-

“Mr. Bunyip! We haven’t seen you in so long!” the children shouted. Bunyip was overjoyed to see them; he purred and wagged his tail in absolute excitement.

The children ran onto the playground and used the previously neglected equipment, which was now restored to its former glory. The playground sparkled with vibrant colours as the children knew what it was like to be creative again. A feeling of freedom floated through the air. Adara softly stated, “Whenever your creativity **hums**, it releases freedom and colour into the atmosphere.” Her words of wisdom would inspire Murray and the children to be creative and imaginative for years to come.

“Fără lemn, focul va muri,” Adara whispered into the wind.

Murray walked over to Adara and said, “What does that phrase you keep saying mean?” “It’s Romanian; it means: Without wood, the fire will die,” she replied.

“Oh, I understand!” said Murray, “without creativity, colour would fade and Bunyip would go along with it.” Adara smiled and nodded. She continued to hum and dance around the playground.

“You’ve really outdone yourself!” exclaimed Janet, sneaking up behind Murray.

“You scared me, and thanks,” Murray mumbled.

“This is your last job and it is outstanding. Congratulations, I no longer own you. Have a nice retirement. Toodles,” she then straightened up and left. Murray was relieved that he would never have to see Janet again.

Bunyip settled in the sandpit and exchanged a special look with Murray. They had a connection that no one could ever comprehend. “It’s time for me to leave the school,” said Murray, “I’m old and ready to retire. The children will look after you, and I know that this won’t happen again. If you ever need me, I’ll be here in an instant. Good luck buddy.” Murray planted a kiss on Bunyip’s forehead. Bunyip replied by brushing his tail over Murray’s legs. “Promise me one thing,” said Murray, “Never forget me.” Bunyip looked into Murray’s eyes, and Murray knew that Bunyip would never forget his best friend.

The clattering of bangles and the swish of Adara's dress could be heard as she danced around the playground. Her headscarf flowed in the wind and the colours lit up the blue sky. The playground was now as bright as it could be, and it matched Adara in her brightness.

Adara smiled as she saw the children using their imagination again.

"Oh no! Pirates! Quick, steer the ship away!" Noah shouted as he was playing with the steering wheel.

"Lavaaaaaaaa!" Bella shouted.

"Don't fall in!" replied Bailey.

The sparkle in the children's eyes was back and the imagination was everywhere, and it was there to stay for good. Adara saw that her work here was done, and she wanted to say one last thing to Murray before she left. She faced Murray and told him, "Albert Einstein once said: creativity is contagious; pass it on." And with one last swish of her dress, she was gone.

- Epilogue -

A new generation of kids filled the playground, jumping in the sandpit, hanging upside down on the monkey bars, chasing each other around the equipment and acting out their own imaginative stories.

Mr. Bunyip was sitting in his corner, radiating with creativity, watching the children enjoying themselves. He felt like he was at home – everyone was choosing to be imaginative instead of hypnotised by the world of technology. Next to him was Murray, now an 80-year-old man who still had a youthful air in his mannerisms, but was slowed down by his aging muscles. Murray moved his hand back and forth on Mr. Bunyip's head, stroking him softly. Bunyip rested his head gently across his companion's frail lap.

A group of children walked up to Murray, begging him to tell the famous story of 'The Playground'. With a twinkle in his eye, he motioned for the kids to take a seat on the floor. They looked up at him, dazzled, ready to take in each word that would come out of his mouth.

He started the story, "Once upon a time, a man

named Murray stood back in amazement, looking at the intricate playground he had finally completed building. It had every piece of equipment that a child could imagine – swings, a slide, monkey bars, a merry-go-round, a see-saw and a sandpit. The playground went further than the eye could see; it was high like a skyscraper and was colourful. Each colour in the playground shone brightly, emitting a glow. It looked like an artist's palette, with a rainbow of colours splattered across it..."

The kids stared at him, open mouthed. Each word he said sparked a mental image in their minds – he was a true storyteller – one that could capture and convince.

"... and then a gypsy called Adara came along. She was... the true essence of creativity. Life followed her wherever she went, and she was adored by all..."

Murray looked down at Bunyip, and stared at his smile. He was enjoying the story, and enjoying the company.

Murray brought his story to a close, "and the children learnt that they needed to develop their imagination, to always leave a trail of creativity

behind them, just as Adara had. They realized that Bunyip could not truly be himself unless they changed the way they thought. The playground can never be colourful, bright and glistening unless you all choose to keep your originality, and let out your inner artistic self.”

After hearing his story, the children gleefully applauded him. They always loved hearing Murray tell stories. Afterwards, they all went off, back to play on the equipment, but Murray and Bunyip stayed sitting. He looked at Bunyip tenderly, and said to him, “I wish Adara was here. She would love to see how the spirit of creativity has been passed to on from one generation of children to another.”

Bunyip nuzzled his head into Murray, in agreement. Murray looked at the children, bitter sweetly, and whispered into the air, “Fără lemne, focul va muri.”