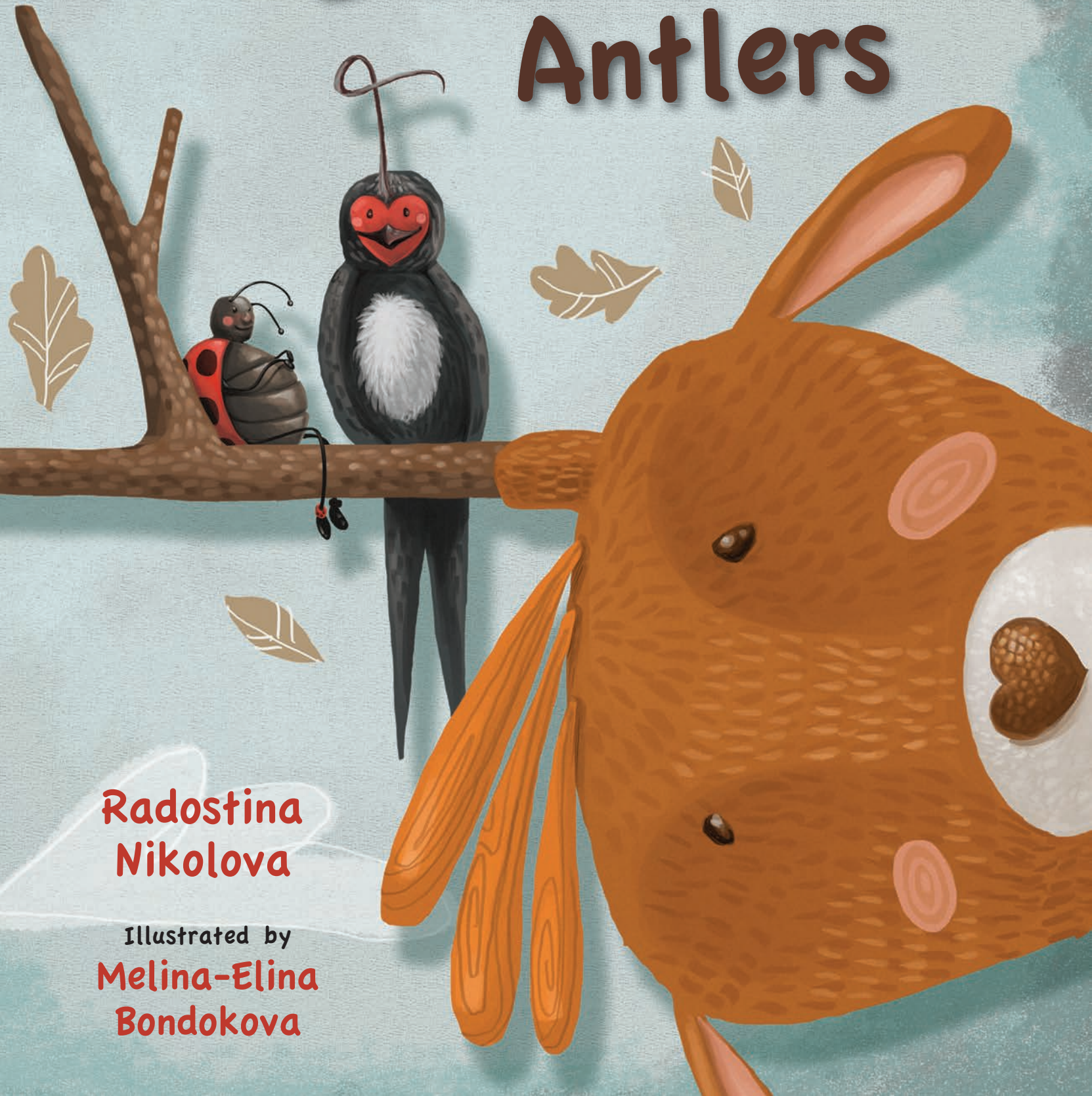


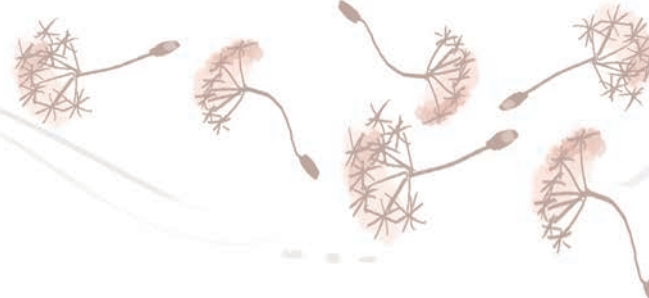


My Beautiful Antlers



**Radostina
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Illustrated by
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Radostina Nikolova

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Vu

Vu was bending over the rainwater puddle and was contemplating himself with admiration. It was exactly two months since he had left the herd and decided to live on his own. He was happy.

The deer was rather odd. He knew that he was different, but he always claimed that it didn't worry him in the least. On the contrary, he liked himself that way. Besides, what did appearance matter? Maybe his greater peculiarity was the fact that he talked a lot. Sometimes his sentences were so long and disconnected that he himself got confused. Other times he decided that he had to use all pretentious words that he knew at all cost, and then things got really bad. Vu believed that the more genteel means of expression he used, the more probable it was that his interlocutor would be impressed and would say to himself, "Well, yes, nature deprived him of one thing, but gave him another..."

Yes, yes, but it didn't exactly turn out that way. Actually his only interlocutors before he left the herd were mere deer who did not really care what clever or silly things Vu said at all.

Besides, he used to communicate mostly with his peers – young deer at about 2 years or a little more of

age, with antlers barely grown and raging hormones. The more Vu tried to impress them with clever things to say, the more they noticed only the obvious: he didn't have **TWO** antlers like the rest of the deer, he had only **ONE**. Vu asked his mother **WHY** it was so but she only waved her hoof carelessly and said "Don't Worry, everything will come into its place!"

But that second antler did not deign to come into its place. That's why Vu decided that if no one was impressed with his gift of speech, and on top of that they were all making fun of him, he didn't belong with the herd.

He left on a sunny spring day. He found a meadow hidden in the heart of the forest and lived there. Grass was growing on one end of the meadow, and he defined

it as "the most exquisite delicacy"; he used one of his favourite words to name the other end of the meadow – "boudoir". Where else if not in his new home could he surround himself with elegant things and let his imagination run wild. He didn't have that freedom with the herd, and he could be himself here. When it rained, a huge puddle formed in the boudoir. The deer loved to look at his reflection and admire himself.

He felt great the first days. Nobody was gossiping behind his back, nobody was making fun of him, nobody was sniggering. Strange were those youngsters from the herd. What was the big deal with his single antler? Don't we all have something to distinguish us from the rest? Vu really believed in that. So he never gave in to the feeling of shame of being different from the other deer.



“Here I am!
Wonderful as always!”

Vu exclaimed when he bent over the puddle. And you, Vincent, how are you up there, nestling in My Beautiful Antlers? No, no! Don’t be too quick to answer. Now that I think of it, you must be wondering why I call my antler that way when it is just one?”

Vu made a dramatic pause but since Vincent apparently didn’t feel like speaking, the deer cleared his throat and continued.

“If somebody speaks of me as the deer with one antler, the listener might come to imagine that I am a unicorn or, God forbid, that terribly ungraceful creature, the rhino. That’s why my antler has a name, Vincent. It’s called My Beautiful Antlers. It might be single but it’s perfect: wonderfully formed, with exquisite symmetrical forms and a mossy surface as soft as velvet. Anyone would envy you, Vincent, living right here in My Beautiful Antlers...”

Vincent, however, didn’t seem to be impressed with that speech at all and remained silent. Vincent was a ladybird who decided to spend the night on the deer’s antler about a week ago and he apparently liked the mossy surface. He would fly off only to eat something and then come back to spend the rest of the time

lying about, listening to Vu’s chatter; who knows if Vincent was enjoying himself or he simply wasn’t paying attention, but some sort of friendship formed between the two of them. That was a very special ladybird to the deer, and the deer was a most ordinary deer to the ladybird. Actually, Vu had tried to make friends with a hedgehog, two rabbits, and a pack of wild boars since he moved to the meadow. But no single animal was impressed with his pretentious language. Vu was placed in a very awkward situation with the wild boars because he wasn’t sure whether they were pigs or boars, so he decided to ask them straight away. The pack of boars, of course, didn’t respond well to that, and all of them started to grunt menacingly towards Vu. He realized that he hadn’t approached them appropriately, he apologized reluctantly and disappeared with quiet steps, his head bowed down. After that occurrence he was this close to giving up new acquaintances, but then he decided to try again. Alas, he chose a still more inappropriate friend. He started running after a wolf, and once the beast had seen him, he instantly started chasing him. Vu thought they were playing tag, but when he stopped for breath, the wolf bit his leg in a most impolite way. The deer saved his own skin by a hair’s breadth and gave a pledge that he would not go to the forest ever again. His adventurous spirit gave way to fear.



He decided that if it was meant to be, fate would send him a true friend, and it would not be necessary for Vu to risk his own life.

Therefore, when Vincent landed on his antler one day, Vundabah looked up to the sky and nodded with gratitude. Just in case. He did not know whether there was something up there that sent him a friend or whether that was just a confused ladybird that had landed on his antler by chance. Vu named his new friend with the pompous name of Vincent and he never stopped talking to him. He even tried to feed him grass once, and whenever he saw other ladybirds on the meadow, he quickly went the other way, so that Vincent would not decide to go back to his own kind and desert Vu. Vincent was far from putting so much feeling in their relationship, he didn't even utter a thing. But to Vu's eyes, the ladybird's arrival was a sign from fate, so he felt happy. Little did he know, however, that it could get even better. Moreover, he didn't have the faintest idea that the better it got, the bigger the risk was that nothing would ever be the same afterwards.

But he was about to find out because Constance came soon.





CONSTANCE

He accidentally found her barely alive one morning. One of her wings was injured, her beak was a bit crooked, and her body was covered with baby fur feathering. Apparently, it was a little bird that was learning to fly. The deer, who was striding proudly towards his boudoir for his morning in-front-of-the-mirror time, spotted her from afar. He winked a few times, hid himself behind a bush, and then peeked with curiosity. The bird was still there, waving one wing and cheeping mournfully. It seemed that she had been peeping all night long because her voice was hardly audible (it was weak and wheezy). Vu had tried to speak to birds before, but every conversation usually ended with pain in the neck because at best they replied to him from up above while they were flying. Vu wasn't sure if he should come closer, but his curiosity was literally gnawing at him. Where had she come from, what was wrong with her, and most importantly **WHAT** exactly was she. Well, he knew she was a bird, of course, but all feathery creatures looked the same to him. He shook his head, gathered strength, and came out from behind the bush. He approached the bird slowly, pretending

to be digging the dirt carelessly with a hoof when he exclaimed with surprise: “Well, well, what have we got here!” He was just about to ask the bird what she was straight away, when he thought that she might get angry with him, just like that pack of wild boars, so he chose a totally new approach... “Constance! For God’s sake! What has happened to you?”

The deer knelt before the bird and she was so surprised that she stopped trembling for a moment. We must give it to Vu that he definitely DIDN’T know how to start a conversation.

“You must be mistaking me for someone else, deer.” The bird cheeped. “I am not Constance. I don’t think I have a name. I am just a swallow.”

A swallow then! Vu thought. He was pleased and he continued.

“No swallow is just a swallow. Just as no animal is just an animal. We are all different, so every one of us deserves to have a name. I am Vu – short for Vundabah. I made it up myself. It comes from Wunderbar which means Wonderful in German. And that’s what I am – Wonderful.”

“Or rather weird. Where is your other antler?” The swallow lifted herself up a bit and gazed at Vu with



curiosity. We must give it to her: she **WASN'T** any good at making conversation either.

"I don't have one." The deer replied, held his head up proudly, and continued: "But I have a lovely "My Beautiful Antlers". Isn't it perfect!"

He then shook his head and started moving it about on all sides, so that Constance could enjoy the view of his perfect antler.

"Whatever", said the bird indifferently. "Where am I?"

"In the third meadow from the right on the left side of the mountain." Vu recited. "Would you like me to show you around?"

"No," the swallow huddled up as if cold wind had blown and continued in a thin voice: "I want to go home."

"Where do you live, Constance?" Vu asked.

"I don't know..." the bird murmured in a thinner voice. "I... that was the first time I came out of the nest. I was learning to fly. The others told me that I wasn't strong enough, that I wasn't ready, but I didn't listen."

"What happened then?" Vu asked with interest, but also a certain amount of anxiety.

"Well, the wind blew... strong... it turned me around... I tried to spread my wings, but I couldn't resist the gusts of wind, so they carried me on and sent me into a tree. I think it was that one," she pointed at the tree right next to them with her beak. "I hit myself badly, I fell down, and I started screaming for help. But none of the others heard me. How far must I be..."

"Oh, Constance! My dear!"

Vu said and reached out his hoof to stroke her head.



“Oh, enough with this Constance, deer! Leave me alone!” The swallow tried to turn away, but the pain in her wing cut her through, and she froze all at once.

“Oh, my dear!” Vu cried again. “Come here,” he continued and gently lifted the bird in his muzzle; he ran down the slope towards the sunny part of the meadow. “You will warm yourself up here and I will bring sticks and leaves to wrap you up. Do you eat invertebrates?”

“They are called Worms, Vu!” The swallow groaned. She was already basking in the sun, and was beginning to soften up a bit in the sunrays.

“All right.” The deer mused. “I think I know where we can find some, but you must come with me.

“Can’t you bring me one and drop it in my beak?” Constance sobbed.

“Don’t be cheeky, you are not a baby bird anymore. You can do it yourself!” Vu scolded and nudged her so that she got up.

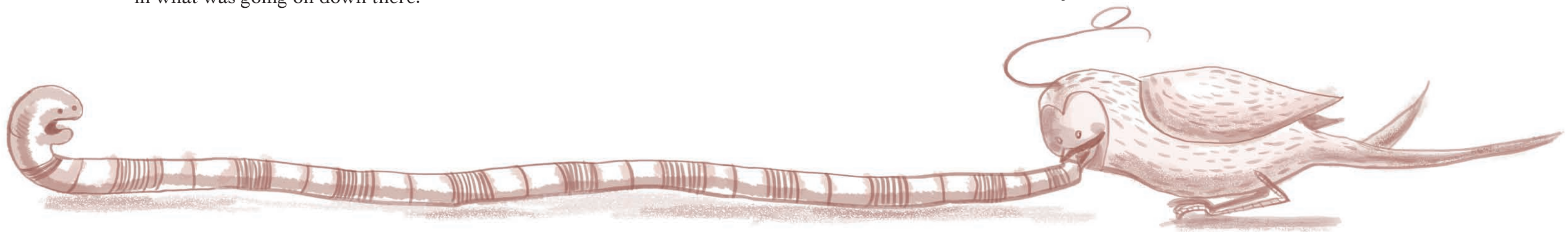
The two of them swayed along the way to a big stone at the end of the meadow – just where the forest started. The ground was moister there. Vu kicked the stone with his hoof and a few Worms moved underneath. Constance lit up and threw herself upon them at once while Wu made a disgusted face and asked Vincent not to look. Vincent, however, didn’t seem to be interested in what was going on down there.

Little by little the ice between Vu and Constance started melting.

He told her about the herd, the deer and their mockery, about how he left, how his mother came to visit him sometimes. He told Constance that he went to the forest to look for friends at first, but it never worked out somehow, so he employed a new “It will happen if it’s meant to be” strategy. The bird was not of the same opinion but decided to say nothing. After that, of course, Vu didn’t forget to mention Vincent’s unusual appearance and their wonderful friendship. He devoted a bit longer to that topic than it was necessary because Constance obstinately refused to understand how a completely mute ladybird could be one’s best friend. In the end, the swallow simply waved it all aside because it was not an easy task to argue with a deer like Vundabah. There were no accidents in his opinion, only fate.

“You, my dear Constance, did not find yourself here by chance either. Our paths are connected. I believe that it’s me whom you must receive valuable advice on life from before you fly south.

Not that your parents wouldn’t do well, but I am far wiser than any other animal in the forest. Vincent knows





it, and that is why he has been living with me for more than ten days now.

“What I think is that I found myself here only because of the strong wind!” Constance snapped at him. “And how can you possibly have such a high opinion of yourself! This is very annoying! No surprise that Vincent pretends to be mute. Before you know it, he might say something and then you’ll never let him be.”

“There is a different kind of relationship between Vincent and me, dear Constance. Do not fret. I am sure that I will come to love you as much one day. I think that I will need a day or two in the least, but keep it in mind that Vincent will always come first in my heart. Don’t take offence, you are wonderfully unpolished and I can see potential, our relationship might develop despite the short time in which I must teach you to fly...”

“Oh, please, shut up already!”

The swallow interrupted him. “You seemed to want to talk about me but it’s all about you again.”

“Yes, you are right, I apologize. You know, when you have been communicating only with yourself for such a long time, you don’t really have that many topics in mind other than **YOURSELF**. It is difficult for me to change but I will listen to you this time. Come on, tell me.”

And she told him. Constance was young. Barely two weeks old. She hadn't seen that much in life, actually she couldn't see at all in the first days after she hatched. Her instincts told her only to open her beak and wait for someone to put something in it. And thus, when she came to her senses bit by bit, the nest felt too cramped for her. The rest of the swallows, her brothers and sisters, did not wish to follow her in the experimental flight.

"Oh, dear! So you decided to take a leap in the dark just like that? Oh, how brave you are, Constance!" Vu exclaimed.

"As a matter of fact, to be precise, I didn't have the intention of leaving them. I only wanted to fly around and come back, you see. It just didn't work out as I thought it would."

"That's fate, Constance!" Vu said with a sense of elation. "Here you are with me! Besides, as far as I

understand, the company in the nest was not especially boisterous."

"You are not that boisterous yourself, but I seem to be bound up with you!" The swallow snapped at him.

"For God's sake, Constance! Look around!" Vu got up and started looking about. "Look at all that space! There are puddles over there." He pointed his antler to the right. "There is a forest there, and we sleep here. We live in an entire palace!"

"But don't you want to get out of this meadow?" The swallow asked.

"I don't see the point. I tried, and you know what happened with the wolf. I have my Vincent, and here you are too, blown in by the wind. Literally, haha! I am sorry about the joke, but it really happened like that after all." Vu chuckled and Constance looked at him badly. "I mean.... Fate must be working to my benefit." The deer cleared his throat. "Why should I risk again?"





“You can’t just sit here and wait for things to happen. Life is full of challenges! That’s the good thing about it. You remind me of my brothers and sisters in the nest. The fact that you got bit a little does not mean a thing.”

“It means that you are now nothing more than a crippled bird, so you will stay here and you will listen to me so that I can cure you. Then you can fly off wherever you wish, so don’t patronize me!” Vu snapped at Constance, and she rolled her eyes. It was clear to her that she was doomed to stay with Vu in the meadow until her wing healed even though she didn’t like that at all. She knew what the deer did every day. She had already spent three days with him and she was bored. Their days were the same from dusk till dawn and their biggest entertainment was to count the branches of the big oak near the meadow.

“Constance, what a miracle of nature, right?” Vu was delighted. “I wonder if My Beautiful Antlers will ever have such a perfect shape: with numerous turns, well in order, and so enticing.

Don’t you want to cuddle up in its branches, to feel the peace and quiet that spreads up there? One day there will be someone who will not be able to draw their eyes from My Beautiful Antlers just as you and I are now contemplating this wonderful work of nature.

Now I understand how happy Vincent feels up there. He can sense the calm touch of nature just as I myself would cuddle up in the crown of that tree and I would just sit quietly, just feel it, do you understand me?

One day, Constance, you will fly up there and you will manage to count the highest branches – all of them that we cannot see from down here. You will catch a glimpse of the tree, all bathed in light. How much grander will it be, bathed in all shades of brown and green! But it won’t be today. Maybe tomorrow...”

The branch counting finished with these same wise words of Vu’s every day. Gradually, Constance got used to life in the meadow. She was sure that Vu loved her even a bit more than he did the ladybird, but he would never admit that. Vincent was special with his silence, and she was second, but she knew that Vu could not make it without her. That’s why she felt a pang in her fragile heart one day when she saw that the baby bird feathering under one of her wings had fallen. The moment for her to leave was coming near. And even though she longed for it, she felt sadness. Therefore, she decided not to pay attention to her bird feathering at least until it became too visible. She hadn’t tried to fly again yet. It seemed true what they said: when a person grows older, their fears become numerous.



“Well, you are not a person, but that’s how the saying goes.” Vu told her and gently stroked her once injured wing with his hoof. “You have to try again, Constance. You are a bird after all, and birds fly. Look at Vincent. He doesn’t even have feathers!” And Vu shook his head to remind Vincent that he too was part of their circle of friends, and he shouldn’t feel ignored. Surely he would venture to speak one day.

“I’m out of shape today.” Constance answered. And so, that conversation ended in those unwise words every time. “Not today, maybe tomorrow.”

One morning Vu and Constance were headed on their usual route to the boudoir for their morning in-front-of-the-mirror time: sprucing up, looking, and admiring. It had been a tough for Constance. She knew that she could not live in the cold and she had to leave. She had to fly south. Vu knew that too and he was sad. But he decided not to show it. She was more important now.

“Look at that, my precious Constance!” He exclaimed when they looked at the puddle. “Your baby bird feathers have almost fallen off. What exquisite black and white feathering! I must admit that I did not expect you would become so beautiful, but now that I think of it, anyone would thrive under my care. Look at me: wonderful, well-built, robust.” The deer continued as he



never drew his eyes from his reflection and kept turning his head to all sides and strutting.

“And what about My Beautiful Antlers! So perfect!”

Constance, on the contrary, wasn't striking funny poses like Vu, she was only studying her reflection in the smooth surface indifferently. She had really grown in the last couple of weeks. When she came here, she was a little bird; and here she was now: a grown-up swallow from her claws all the way up to that sleek feather right above her right eye.

“How strange! Have you too changed that much since you came here, Vu?” The bird turned to the deer.

“It's NOT important what you see on the outside, Constance, but what you see here, inside.”

The deer turned his eyes to the swallow's reflection in the puddle and his hoof touched the spot where her heart was supposed to be. Then he winked knowingly for a few seconds and continued. “When I look at myself in that puddle, I don't see only a deer with one antler. Yes, I am handsome, of course, there is no doubt, but what happens beyond that perfect appearance is much more interesting. I gaze into my eyes and I take long walks along the complex labyrinths of my soul. As I told

you, I didn't have much entertainment before I met you and I formed a deep attachment to this puddle. This is not just my boudoir. This is where I see myself both inside and out. “

Constance had stopped hearing him somewhere in the middle of that serious monologue. His calm voice carried her away and she sometimes fell asleep while listening to him. Not so much because she was bored, but more because of the pleasant monotonous rumble. Well, alright, sometimes she was bored, but she never admitted it to him. Vu felt that Constance was not listening to his wise words, and that made him a little bit angry because he knew that he was really saying something meaningful this time, so he changed the tone abruptly:

“Come on, little one, it's time for you to try to fly. If you live here for some more time, you will turn into an ostrich or a kiwi bird. It's a good thing that you are cleverer, at least than the ostrich. I am not that well-acquainted with the ways of kiwi birds, though.

“Oh, please, shut up, will you!” Constance couldn't stand it anymore. “When you start blabbering, I often forget where you've started from. How can you possibly talk so much!?”

“That's an art, my dear Constance! And you are extremely lucky to have spent so many days with me.



But it's time to fly now. I can cure an injured wing, but I cannot deal with a frozen body. Or have you acquired the skill to hibernate like a bear? Because unless you have, I don't think that you can technically... survive."

And then he saw her.

Constance was not listening to him. His blabber had obviously been too annoying. She was floating in the sky with such ease and grace that Vu managed only to swallow and heave an audible "Wooooooow!" Constance was making lovely shapes in the sky, one moment she was going up with a quick wave of her wings, the next she was going down, and then up again.



Vu was following her with his eyes, he was turning one way or another, and there was a big smile spreading on his muzzle.

In another moment, Constance disappeared at the other end of the meadow and Vu ran after her with all his might. When he reached the big oak, he stopped and looked up. Constance gracefully descended and landed in his feet.

“23 big and 47 middle-sized branches! I didn’t have enough strength to count the little ones, but I promise I will do so tomorrow.” The swallow said, breathless with excitement. Her eyes were burning and she seemed to be trembling.

“Oh, Constance!” Vu knelt down and drew his muzzle towards her. “I am so proud of you! So is Vincent! Right, Vincent?”

The swallow smiled and winked delightedly.

“You can’t imagine how nice it is up there! One feels so free, so out of reach. It’s amazing!”

Vu only nodded. He knew that the moment was near and he could not reply. He winked with a smile on his face, but there was a lump stuck in his throat. He didn’t want Constance to leave. He didn’t want to be left alone with Vincent again. He loved him more than anything, but Vincent **DIDN’T SPEAK**. Vu felt genuine

affection for Constance. It was thanks to her that he had learned what a true friend was. And as much as he liked his previous life, he could not imagine going back to it when she flew away.

“Hey, you’re not going to cry, are you?” Constance interrupted his thoughts. “I am still here, I haven’t gone anywhere. I have no idea which way to go, you see.” The swallow smiled and trembled. One could feel the first breath of cold wind in the air.

“Nonsense!” Vu stuck his chest out. “Something got into my eyes. Don’t take yourself so seriously, Constance. I have managed before. I will manage again. Besides, I have Vincent!”

“Do you know that sometimes I think Vincent is either deaf or has departed to God?” The bird snapped ruthlessly. “Why have you even decided that you are friends? Would you like me to try and peck him so as to check if he’s alive?”

“**Don’t you dare!**” Vu stepped back. “You just envy him because he is warm up there in My Beautiful Antlers while you are forced to depend only on your own feet to move!”

“Add the wings tooooo!” Constance peeped happily and once again vigorously flew up into the sky.

“Show-off!” Vu shouted and laughed.



Vu spent more time alone the next days. Constance was becoming braver and braver, she would fly further and further. Then she would come back excited and would tell Vu what she had seen for hours on. She said that there was a man who lived in a snug cottage not far from him and in her opinion, that man was the perfect friend for the deer. He had a dog and a few hens. Vu frowned at the idea of leaving his meadow, but his curiosity was gnawing at him. "What would it be like to communicate with a person: that most superior creature, the cleverest and ablest of all beings!" The deer had only heard things about people and he really wanted to get to know them. Maybe he could actually make friends with that exact person who, just like him, lived alone in the forest. But Vu quickly became hesitant again because the memory of what had happened to him in the unknown not long ago came to his mind.

The days were passing by and it was getting colder.

Constance came back with more interesting stories every day and she flew further and further away. She had met a sparrow and a turtle-dove.

They exchanged a few words every day when she passed them by and they always asked her: "Are you still here? Hurry up! Autumn is coming!", and she always gave them the same answer with a smile: "There's enough time!" And she continued on her way through

the branches, above the forest, past the man's cottage, all the way to the big road where the cars were.

"I saw him feeding the hens today." Constance started her latest story. "You need to know, the man in the cottage is very caring. If only you had seen how they were swarming about him. And the dog didn't dare to bark. He only stood in the corner and watched the man. I am telling you, Vu, you have to meet him. It's not that far away. If you start in the morning, you will be there by lunchtime."

"Don't worry, Constance.

Don't think about me."

Vu smiled. "I am a big boy. I will be turning three in a few days' time. Come on, pack your bags and fly away because it's getting pretty cold. It's almost mid-September. How long are you going to wait?"

Constance knew that it was time. She lifted her head up and felt the cool wind on her feathers just above her eyes. While she was winking against the wind, she was startled by a strange noise. She opened her eyes and saw them: hundreds of swallows in the sky. They were flying away in a beautifully arranged flock. Her time was up.



VINCENT

Vu woke up early the next day. He looked around but did not see Constance. It's true, they had discussed that she should fly away one of those days, but he didn't expect her departure to be so sudden. He didn't believe she could just leave without saying goodbye.

That show-off will be back any minute now, right, Vincent?" Vu came back to his senses and shook his head. "Let's hurry to my boudoir for our morning toilet and then we'll come back down here to breakfast in the sunshine. Look, what a lovely day it is today! Do you know that such warm days are called Indian summer! Why so? Well, people have made that up. Perhaps they are supposed to know why. People!" Vu repeated that to himself and an idea crossed his mind for a moment; an idea that had found its place in his head: to go to meet that man Constance had told him about. However, it wasn't his style to take risks after that unfortunate attack. What if the man turned out to be bad? She hadn't been in touch with him after all. It was much better for Vu to stay here with Vincent and, if it was destined to be, some new companion would come into his life. Right? Yes! After he had a hearty



breakfast of delicious grass, Vu went to
the sunlit meadow and lay down on
one side just as Constance and
he had done every day
before she left. “Has
she really flown

away just like that?”

Vu wondered again. Maybe
that was for the best. She knew him
well and she knew that a farewell would
upset him. Besides, there was a long time until
springtime and it was possible that they would never
ever meet again. “Never...” fell into the silence and Vu’s
stomach instinctively turned with all the hidden sorrow
of a missed farewell with a true friend.

“Oh, my silly pride... Why didn’t I tell her how much
I cared about her! What shall I do now? Will I ever find
anyone as close as her!” Vu cried out and threw his head
over his front hooves. His whole body shook with the
pain of half-expressed feelings. All of a sudden, he stood
up and shouted with irritation: “And you! How long
will you stay up there and not utter a sound! What a
friend are you, eh? Even now, when I need you so, why
are you silent? I am talking to you, Vincent! Come on,
I need you! Please...” He threw his head on his hooves
again and he shook with tears. Something then hit the
ground before him.

“Vincent!”

Vu shouted with hope and excitement. But Vincent did
not move an inch. He was just a small lifeless ladybird...

Emotions hit Vu’s body like a heavy hailstorm. They
were slowly making their way into his fur, his skin, his
flesh and muscles, until they hit his heart with all their
might.

He let himself lie down on his back, feeble, with his
four legs apart in all four directions, and his eyes roved
over the sky, but they didn’t see anything... Uninvited
thoughts started dancing in his head. That was his way
of letting all the hidden sorrow out, and it came upon
him like a hurricane wind. He started reciting through
tears. At first quietly, near the end he was virtually
shouting wildly...



All at once the world stopped turning
For a moment, two, or three...
Oh, how hard life is without a friend,
Even one who never speaks to thee.

My heart is empty and I know not
Will I ever fight my sorrowful lot.
Dark, black impenetrable darkness
Will spread for days on, it may be endless...

I will neglect my looks,
And I am losing appetite.
I want to hide away in secret nooks

I feel useless,
Funny and all wronged.
As if I never here belonged.

Now what?
How will I make it all on my own?

Three days passed without Constance and Vincent. Three days in which Vu could not tell day from night. Three long days in which he had not uttered a single word. And why should he? There was no-one to speak to. He buried Vincent under the same stone where Constance and he had fished for worms. Vu wouldn't have to pick it up again soon. She was gone and the worms could now heave a sigh of relief. The deer was lying under the oak whose branches Constance and he used to count, and he was looking at them.

"One, two, three... fifteen, thirty two..."

The green crown of the tree had long changed its colour to deep orange and sad brown. A leaf fell from the tree and flew towards Vu. It perched right upon his nose. He blew it away with irritation and went on counting.

"Thirty four, thirty five..."

One more leaf fell off and started swaying in the wind. Vu followed its dance in the air with his eyes. The leaf was pirouetting again and again in its last living

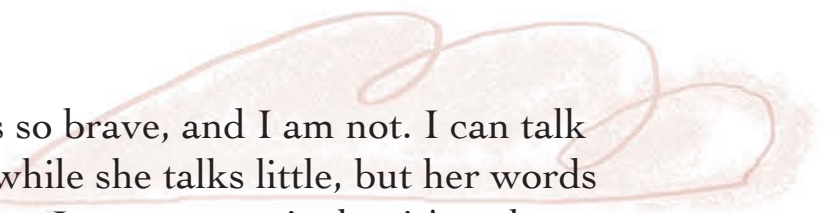




moments, it was tossing in the wind as if it was really having fun. The wind quickly sent it up, then it floated down, and the wind played with it again. Vu smiled at this unusual dance of the wind with a leaf. An amazingly fragile friendship that was about to end any second now. But then the wind was going to play with another leaf, to stroke the grass, chase the birds, blow in the clouds, and ruffle the flowers. The wind had friends everywhere. He didn't wait for them to look for him but found them himself.

“Everything in life happens for a reason!”

Vu told himself. “Vincent taught me that true friends always come when you need them; and even if they don't speak, their closeness itself is soothing. I bet that I gave him coziness and warmth which he needed, just as much as he gave me comfort. Of course! What about Constance? She helped me learn to listen rather than just speak. She came into my life



for a reason. She is so brave, and I am not. I can talk a lot and say little while she talks little, but her words mean so much. What I want to say is that it's a shame to hide out here and deprive my future friends of the opportunity to know such a wonderful deer as me. And there's the wind now, telling me that while I am sitting here, pitying myself, there is great enjoyment all around me. Come on, up you go! Don't be sad about your friends who have left, but be happy that they have been part of your life. Everything in life happens for a reason, Vu. And you know it! Aren't you curious to know what lies ahead of you now?” he smiled hardly perceptibly and a well-forgotten little flame flickered in his eyes. The deer got up, shook his head, and shuffled to his boudoir. Oh my, how hungry he was! Anyway, food could wait for now. He had to wash up first, to shake the dust off My Beautiful Antlers, to clean the mucus left after the dried out tears, and shine in absolute splendour. There was an important meeting coming. He decided to overcome his fear and go to meet the man in the forest.





MY BEAUTIFUL ANTLEERS

The forest was quiet that day. There were no wolves, neither hedgehogs. It was still warm and one could hear birds in the trees; they were having heated arguments over certain bird things of their own. Before he knew it, Vu had arrived. Once he came closer, the dog that was inside started barking. The deer was startled and froze.

“Hush, Koko!” A voice shouted in the garden. “What are you going on about?”? But Koko kept on barking and Vu could not move. All at once, his memories of the wolf, the attack, the snarl came upon him and his heart beat wildly. “What did you do, Vu!” The deer muttered to himself. “You are such a bonehead! Bones must forgive me that I am using them for comparison, but I guess that’s the custom. When you tell someone they are a “bonehead” and... Oh, here I go again, blabbering on, and this beast is still barking like that. God, my feet are stuck here, why can’t I move them?” Vu tried to lift a foot, but with no success.

He was just about to start crying when a hand appeared from behind the bushes, then another one, and finally a big head peeped between the branches. “Oh!” The man was surprised. “That’s what all the barking was about, buddy! Look at that marvellous deer!”

When Vu heard the word “marvellous”, he eased up a bit, but his heart was still beating wildly inside and he was still standing there, staring at the man’s eyes. He looked kind to Vu, but who could just trust anyone at first glance... Vu closed his eyes and opened them again. He wanted to know if the man would seem nice at second glance. He turned right. The man was not only nice, but he was now even smiling at him.

“That’s a miracle – the first time I have seen a deer at such a close distance. And he’s got only one antler!” The man was talking to himself and was approaching Vu slowly. “The other antler must have fallen off. After all, it’s the end of September.”

He slowly stretched his hand out towards Vu’s head. The deer moved backwards at once and the man tried to calm him down. “Don’t be afraid, beautiful friend. I only want to see what is going on in here.” And he stroked the deer’s head. Vu winked with delight and slightly bowed his head, but the man then touched My Beautiful Antlers and Vu started as if a wasp had stung him. The man instinctively tightened his grip on the antler and Vu started jumping in a state of panic.

“The man wants my antler!
He wants my antler! My pride!
No, that’s not possible! No, for God’s sake, let me go!”



“Calm down, boy!”

The man was shouting, but Vu kept jumping about, throwing his head riotously and suddenly... his antler fell into the man’s hand. For a moment, Vu felt as if his life was going out through his ears. They were literally on fire. Vu gave a powerful guttural roar from the bottom of his soul, his eyes filled with tears, and he ran off into the forest with no direction, not hearing the words of the man behind him.

“Wait! Come back! I will explain! There’s nothing to be afraid of! Don’t be scared...”

Vu was running as fast as he could, crying bitterly, painfully, furiously. He reached his meadow and dramatically fell down on the ground. He threw his head into the grass and started crying uncontrollably. There was no turning back now and everything ahead was dark, deaf and empty. The world had just fallen into pieces.

“Good gracious! You are such a drama queen!”

The deer heard a familiar voice and slowly lifted his head off the ground. There she was in front of him – Constance, in all her black and white perfection, a grown-up swallow. He had not seen her only for a few days, but she seemed a lot different to him.



“Oh, Constance!” Vu could hardly utter. He burrowed his muzzle in her wings. “What are you doing here? I thought you had flown away.”

“Really? Without saying “Goodbye”? How could you think so? I was here all the time. I was watching you. I wanted to see if you could manage without me. But, obviously, it won’t do. You almost died when you found out that Vincent was not among the living. Seriously? He most probably died before we even met! He was simply stuck in your antler.

Vu remembered all of a sudden and he shouted out loud: “My antleeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeer! Now I look like a hiiiiiiiiind!”



“Oh, come on!” Constance tried to calm him down. “You are still handsome! You are well-built, you have perfectly smooth fur, a noble look in the eyes, a pretty smile and...” here she lifted his lip with her beak and knocked at one of the front teeth: “... Wonderful healthy teeth!”

The sound of hurried steps came from the forest, and Koko the dog and his master appeared.

“Oh, noooo, help!” Vu shouted and hid behind Constance – as if she could protect him.

“Calm down, boy! I ran here only to calm you down. There’s nothing to be afraid of! Every deer loses their antlers. Maybe you didn’t know and that’s why you got scared. The antlers fall off and then new ones grow. Haven’t you seen that happen to other deer in the herd?” the man was out of breath, so he sat down on the ground to rest. Constance turned to Vu and looked at him in bewilderment; his eyebrows furrowed in disbelief.

“Don’t talk nonsense, man! How can you be so sure?

“Well, I am sure because I know. It is strange that you don’t. When your antlers grow sometime around your second year, they start falling off every autumn, and then they grow back again in the spring. It happens every year and they grow larger every time. Haven’t your antlers fallen off yet? Really?”

“One... antler.” Constance whispered to the man. “It was only one.” Koko laughed at that and the man gave him a slight kick to remind him to behave himself.

“Look, would you like to make a bet on something. I am sure that at least one antler will grow back before springtime!” The man smiled and Vu lifted his head and looked at him with his big eyes. “And there’s one more thing: Would you like to come visit me in the winter? That’s, of course, if your herd doesn’t mind that. “

“I don’t have a herd.” Vu uttered. “We didn’t get along because they thought I was different and they never

managed to appreciate my gift of speech. That’s why I left them. I live on my own now.”

“It is more than certain that their antlers have also fallen off by now, so you all have equal chances for the spring.” The man grinned. “I am Theo, by the way. You already know where I live, so you are welcome anytime you wish. Do you want your antler?” He asked and held out his hand which was clutching My Beautiful Antlers.

“No.” Said Vu. “Keep it. I will be coming over to see it and to check if you are taking good care of it. Besides, it is so beautiful that it would give heavenly charm to the wall in your plain little house.”

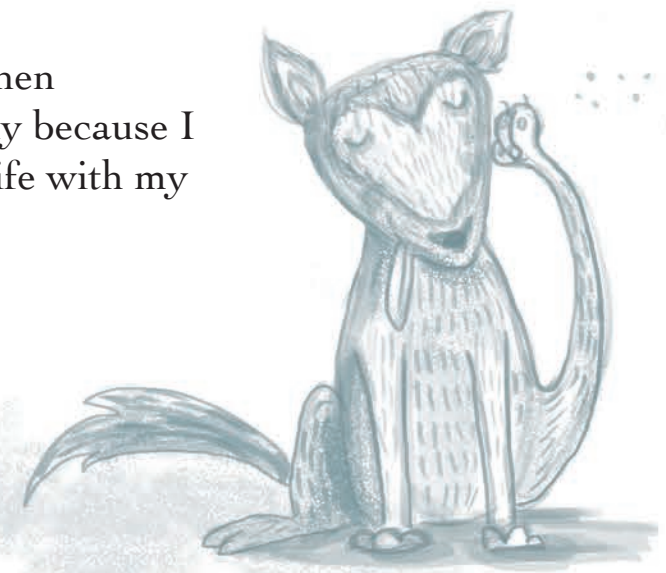
“Oh, there it is again – his gift of speech is back.”

Constance rolled her eyes. “I’d better go now, before he starts blabbering or else I will have to fly all the way to Africa with a severe headache.”

“Constance, thank you for coming back to say goodbye. Thank you for being here for me, for teaching me to be braver. Now when Vincent is gone, you are my best friend.” Vu smiled and his nose touched her wing gently.

“Oh, please, we both know that I was your best friend even before the ladybird kicked the bucket.” Constance laughed and Vu decided not to answer. That was something new to him.

“Thank you too, Theo! Now, when Constance leaves, you will be lucky because I will give meaning to your boring life with my wise thoughts.



Koko whined and looked at Constance with hope, but she only shrugged her shoulders.

“Adios, amigos!” The swallow said and flew away. “I will see you in the summer, Vu. I will know you by your new My Beautiful Antlers. Probably they will look as impressive from above as the wonderful branches of our oak.”

Vu smiled and first waved to Constance, then to Theo and Koko. When he was alone, he started for his boudoir. His usual good spirits had come back again. Life had offered him a challenge once more, but in the end, it all worked out well – as it happens with all bad things in life. Everything happens for a reason, right? Vu suddenly froze in the middle of the road. The gentle shape of a hind was visible on top of the hill.

“Mother!” Vu shouted.

“Happy birthday, my boy!” His mother smiled. “And congratulations on the change of antlers!”

“So that’s true?” Vu gaped. Will I grow a new antler before springtime?”

“You may even grow two!” His mother smiled and caressed his muzzle gently. “Didn’t I tell you that sooner or later everything comes into its place?”

THE END
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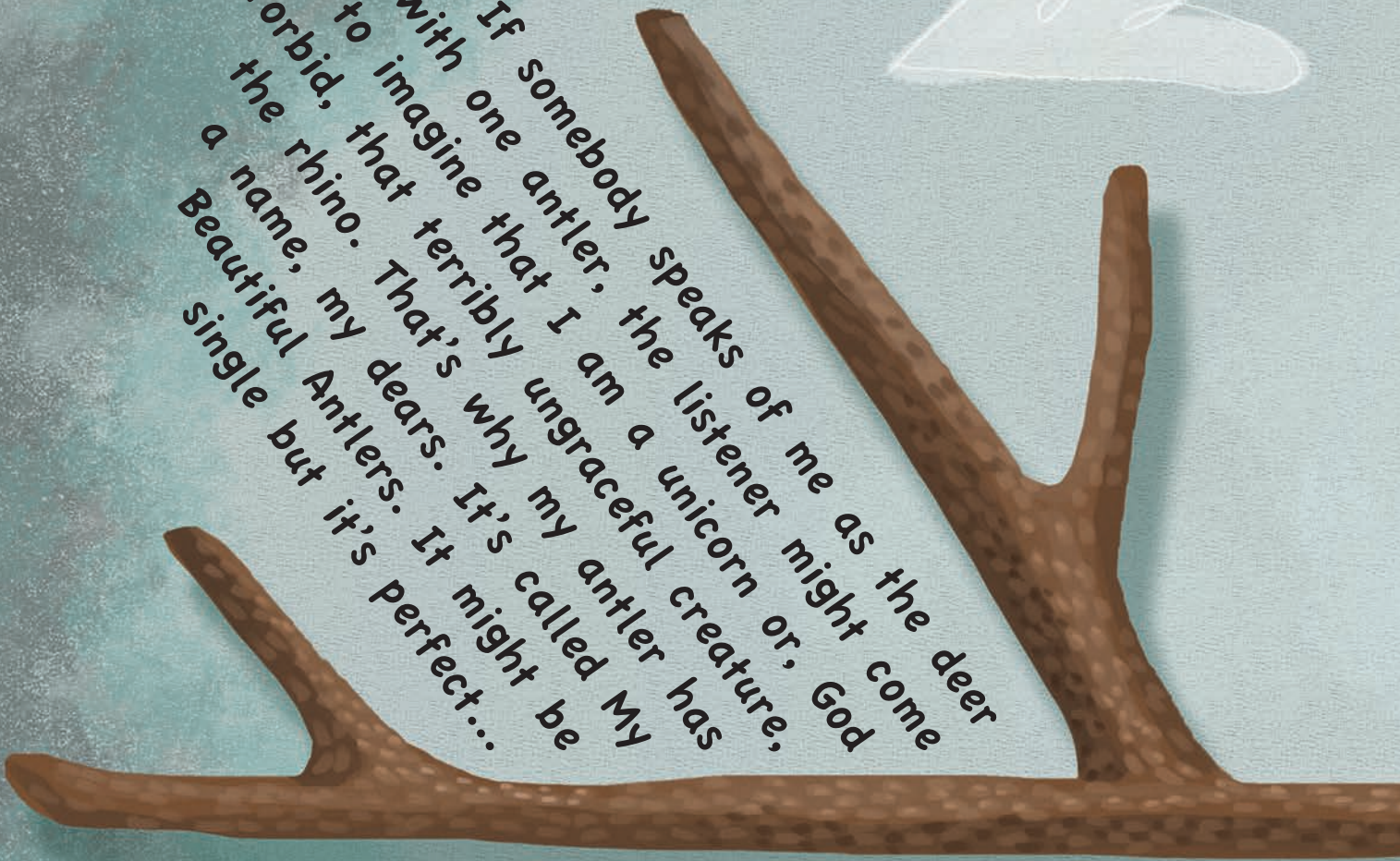
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If somebody speaks of me as the deer
with one antler, the listener might come
to imagine that I am a unicorn or, God
forbid, that terribly ungraceful creature,
the rhino. That's why my antler has
a name, my dears. It's called My
Beautiful Antlers. It might be
single but it's perfect...



Even though he is different from
the rest of his herd, Vundabah the deer is
one perky chatterer.

His fragile and delicate world looks
perfect to him. Through the eyes of his
friends though - it's quite the opposite.

Will his never-ending optimism ever crack
if fate has served him with
an unexpected farewell?