

Haunted

They keep watching me. I try not to be noticed. I am a bit self-conscious. It seems I am unusual, special.

They do have CCTV cameras which I suspect run every minute of the day.

If you check the label on my enclosure here at Wingham Wildlife Park¹, you will see I am a pygmy three-toed sloth (*bradypus pygmaeus*). I am, apparently, originally from Isla Escudo de Veraguas, a small island off the Caribbean coast of Panama.

Panama is where the hats come from, Erica says.

It seems I wasn't born there. My first memory in my present life as a sloth is being cuddled by my personal attendant, a human called Erica Jacques.

I do love Erica. I really do.

Erica was my first human contact, acting as my surrogate mother when I was a baby. Sadly, my mother was moved on within a few days of my birth, part of a multi-animal swap deal with a zoo in Germany. Because she was expecting me, they delayed the deal until I was born but the Germans got uppity and off Mummy went, leaving me with Erica.

The humans call me Hatty but, as this makes no sense to me, I decided from the outset to ignore them by turning a deaf ear when they use that name.

Because I am a sloth, they think I am dumb, unobservant. Of course, the other sloths here know better. They call me Einstein. As an experiment the humans gave us a chess set to see what we made of it. So far, I have yet to lose a game. This is because years ago I was a human called Ivor Gryndinski, a Polish Jew from Warsaw. When I was Ivor, I was a Grand Master at chess. I tried to escape from Hitler's war. We were heading for the USA when our ship was sunk.

That's when I became a walrus (*odobenus rosmarus*). Back then I was a big chap about 3.6 metres long and over 1,000 kilos, with tusks over a metre in length. I was a very good father and although generally walruses are prone to arguing and in-fighting, because I had oodles of charisma, they made me their leader. It was unanimous.

If you know anything about the modern history of the walrus, you may have heard of me, King Wilbert the First. My wife and close family called me Bertie, Good King Bertie. My great-great-great grandson King Wilbert the Fourth is in charge now.

¹ <https://winghamwildlifepark.co.uk/>

Wingham Wildlife Park, Kent, England.

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The end of my reign was tragic, truly tragic. While defending my little tribe against a marauding polar bear, I stabbed at her feet with my tusks. This made her so mad she slashed at my face with her claws, blinding me. The wounds became septic and I simply faded away.

To be totally honest, it was a merciful death as I absolutely hated the intense cold away up there in the north-east of Greenland where it is usually around minus 50 Celsius during winter and seldom above zero even in high summer.

Is it any wonder I elected to re-appear as a sloth? On the Isla Escudo de Veraguas where my ancestors come from, it ranges from 12 to 27 Celsius year-round which is just perfect for a sloth.

But here is my problem. I live in fear, haunted by a recurring nightmare.

Somewhere in the recesses of my memory there lurks a notion that once upon a time I was attacked by a pterodactyl, (*quetzalcoatlus northropi*), a big one with a wingspan of 11 metres. That was a long time ago, millions of years ago, in fact.

I should explain, Erica, my keeper, is obsessed by dinosaurs. She talks about them ALL the time. Her speciality is the group known as the *megalonychids*. They were giant sloths who lived about 35 million years ago and, back then, they were more active, hopping all over the area now called Panama.

I suppose that's why Erica and I are so close because we share a common interest.

I know that humans think we are sleepy, dozy. In my case it's because I suffer from insomnia, caused by nightmares. I hardly ever manage more than a few minutes respite in a full day.

In my worst nightmare I am a *megalonyx*, a large-clawed sloth about three metres long and weighing more than 1,000 kilos. As you might imagine, I am not quick on my feet.

In this nightmare I am being attacked by a flight of a dozen of more pterodactyls, those big ones I mentioned. I hop and hop and hop but they keep swooping down on me. It's exhausting.

Then, in this nightmare, I see a cave ahead with a narrow entrance. I squeeze inside and after a while, I fall asleep. This is bad because as soon as I slip over, I am caught up in my nightmare, out in the open again, being chased by pterodactyls swooping down, pecking lumps out of me.

As before, I see the cave and squeeze inside and fall asleep but the nightmare repeats, haunting me night and day. It is totally exhausting which is why I always look sleepy and why I walk with slow, jittery movements, a hangover from my pre-historic hopping days.

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But look!

There is my friend Erica, waving to me from just inside my enclosure.

I start towards her, trying to run even though I know it can be dangerous. Erica realises and strides towards me. I drop from the branch into her arms.

I do love Erica. I really do.

She cuddles me and whispers:

'Hatty, I have big, big news for you. We are sending you to Raquel's Ark² in Panama where you will be back on home ground. What do you think of that?'

I look up into her eyes and she smiles.

'But don't worry, old boy, I'm coming with you, to help you settle in.'

I do love Erica. I really do.

² <https://raquelsark.com/> a rescue centre for exotic animals.