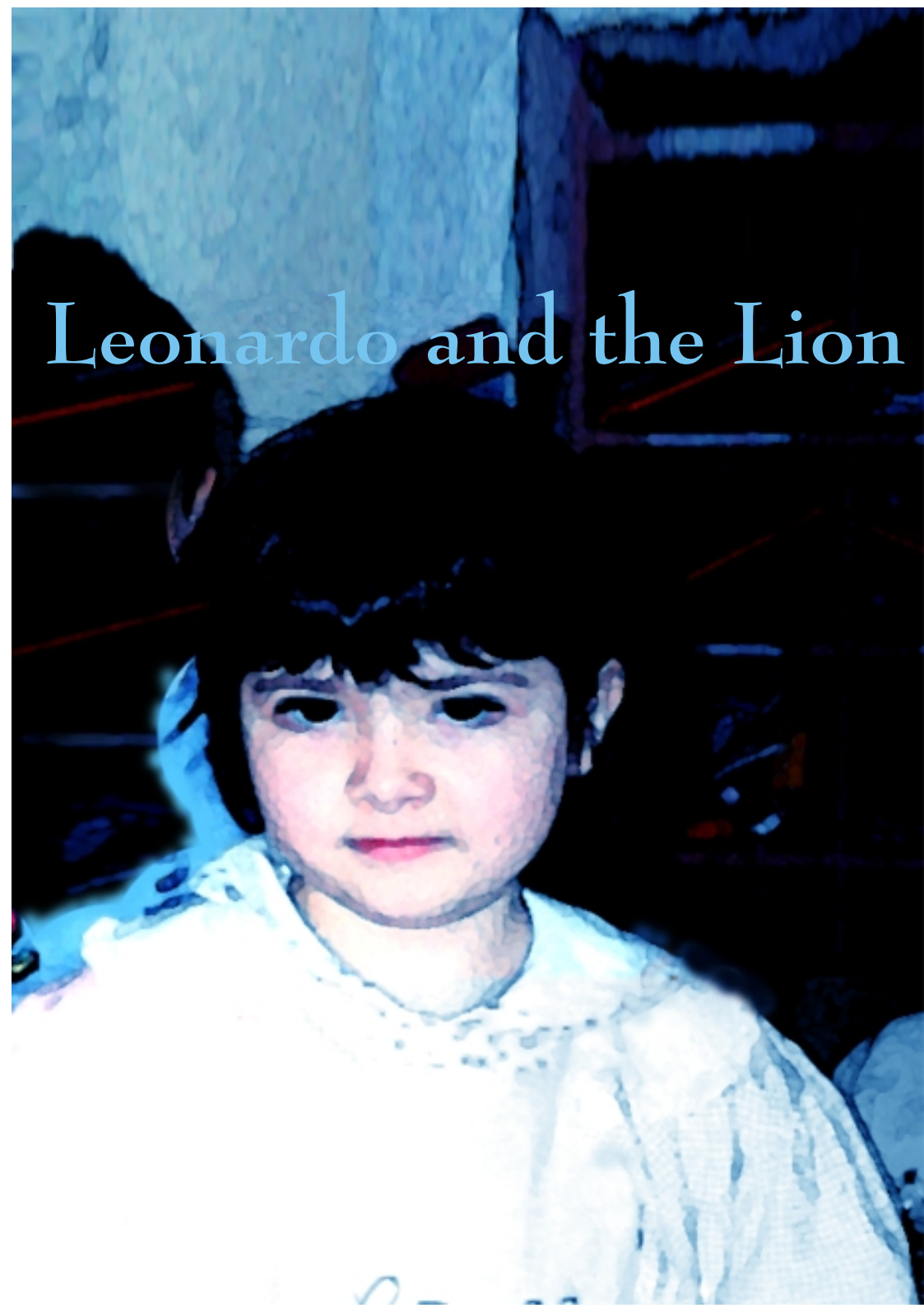


# Leonardo and the Lion





## Leonardo and the Lion

So, Leonardo did exactly as he was told. That evening he slept a little and then just as the first stars began to peep out, he hopped out of his snug little bed, dressed himself in his warmest clothes and crept up to the front door to wait. There wasn't a sound to be heard anywhere! Well, it's a long and strange story. So let me tell you who he was waiting for!

Leonardo lived with his uncle -Zio Franco - in a tumble-down quarter in the Italian city of Venice by the Adriatic sea. Now that's a strange place if ever you saw one. Seems as old as old can be. Picture book palaces and ice cold churches that seem to float upon the sea. Matter of fact they rest firmly on wooden poles that have been driven into the sea-bed. The streets are narrow and twisty, turning crookedly, climbing up and over little bridges across canals. There's water almost everywhere you look. So folk go about on boats a lot. And when it rains well, just imagine!

Leonardo was just seven. He and his uncle got on pretty well but they didn't exactly do a great deal of talking to each other. The boy would have liked to see a bit more of his uncle but that particular grown-up was a very busy body and not so easy to track down. I'm not quite sure what he was up to.

Anyway, their house was near the seaward end of the city where the old arsenal had once been. It was the military post from where the townspeople used to send out warships when they had quarrels to settle in other lands. Although sailors still go in and out during the day, things are very different today.

Right by the old brown arsenal there's a small town square where a number of stone lions have been standing for as long as anyone cares to remember. Some local people say that they came from Egypt long ago. The spot is really popular with tourists and children often climb up onto one of the lions to have their photo taken. The stray cats of the neighbourhood also linger around and people sometimes put out scraps of food for them. Leonardo often played in the square with his furry little friends but even when he was out on his own, he felt a strange happiness, imagining that the strong lions were watching out for him with their fierce eyes. He was so glad they were around!

On rainy days the cats and kittens stayed indoors and then the boy splashed around in the puddles, hanging around on the iron bridges listening to the water flowing down into the drains and the drip-drip-dripping from the roofs of the houses.

One rainy day, just as he reached his front door, Leonardo heard excited voices and turning his head quickly he just caught a glimpse of his uncle's sky blue coat as he turned the corner hurrying briskly off with a stranger he had never seen before. That evening the boy fell asleep waiting up for Zio Franco. The waiting became worrying when he hadn't returned by sun up ...







The day slipped slowly by and as evening approached, Leonardo grew very anxious. He stared sadly at the open front door that yawned deep and blue in the fading light. It had grown quite dark when he decided to go to the square to talk to the smart cats. They were streetwise. Maybe they knew something? It was then that the strangest things started to happen!

The kittens were usually sent early to bed but there wasn't even a cat around. Nor even a leaf blowing about in the wind. The square was still and quiet. He climbed up onto the back of the largest of the stone lions and put his skinny arms around its big neck fighting back hot tears.

"I wish ... I wish I could ride you away from here," he whispered into its furry ear giving it a big hug. He clung on there sadly for a while and then he had the funniest feeling. He wasn't really sure but the cold stone seemed to slowly grow warm. And then he felt the flesh of the Lion start to breathe. All of a sudden it moved with a low grunt! There was no doubt about it! The boy scrambled off and fell to the ground landing with a bump! Something wet and bristly brushed his cheek. The Lion licked him gently.

"Keep away!" Leonardo cried out shocked.

"Do not be afraid," the Lion purred majestically.

"I'm not!" the small boy shouted out nervously.

"Come now," the Lion purred persuasively, "I'd really like to help you - if I may."

The great gray Lion looked at him with his big sad eyes and suddenly Leonardo felt his fear slip away. He tossed his head back and looked deep into those watchful eyes. "How can you help me?" he asked.

"My name ... is ... Zanzibar. I'm from the deserts of Egypt," the Lion said rather grandly. "I'll explain later. Just do as I say for now. I know that you're not afraid of the shadows or of walking out at night. Go home now and get some rest. I'll knock for you after midnight - let's see if we can find Zio Franco!"

Leonardo didn't have to be told twice! He raced off as fast as he could, his black hair blowing wildly about him.

Well ... now you know what happened just a few hours ago. So, let's go back to the beginning of the story when Leonardo crept up to the front door wondering whether the Lion was going to come or not!

At exactly one o'clock in the morning, the bells in the nearby churches began to chime softly. At that moment he heard a deep low growl followed by a rap-a-tap-tap at the door! His heart beat so loud he thought it would burst! Then a rough and friendly voice said: "It's Me, Zanzibar, Open up!" Leonardo flung the door ajar. There in the starlight stood the wonderful animal.

"Are you ready?" it asked.

"Yes," whispered Leonardo, holding his breath as he stepped out, closing the front door after him.

"Let's be off before anyone sees us!" the Lion said. "Mount upon my back and hold on tight to my mane!" Leonardo hopped up obediently and the Lion padded softly off into the moonlight. No one saw them go except for the occasional mouse scuttling busily away.

They passed quickly through the backstreets. The houses seemed asleep, full of secrets both mysterious and exciting, every window shutter closed, the doors barred up for the night. After a while they turned into a very dark alley. It led them to a very typical Venetian square and an old water well standing right in the middle of it. This particular well was wonderfully carved with figures of small dancers cut from the stone, happy children carrying garlands of flowers and fruit.



These figures are called 'putti' in Italian art and they are said to bring good luck. They're a mix between an angel and a real child. As they approached it they heard the faintest strains of music and then Leonardo could see that once more things were not at all what they first seemed to be! The figures of stone, like the big lion, came very much alive after nightfall!

The Lion addressed them in a splendid tone saying: "Spirits of Plenty! I wish you the finest of evenings!" The wild-eyed Putti greeted them merrily. Their rosy mouths were smeared with fruit juice and they were in high spirits, squirting water at each other very mischievously and fooling about rather noisily!



"Where have you been Zanzibar? It's such a long time since we last saw you!" they called out reproachfully.

"I know," apologized the Lion graciously. "I've been so busy! I've had to keep an eye on the cats," he explained. "Most of the little kittens have been falling ill with scabies this winter. They don't get many vitamins and few humans take much notice. Then when they are hungry, they often fight amongst themselves - Why, some of the littlest kittens have bits of their ears missing! Bitten off! I've had to put a stop to it, and they've all been given different territories, but we still haven't solved the vitamin problems ..."

There were a few squeals and a riotous burst of laughter as more water-squirting began! The Putti weren't listening to a word!

"Well, let's get on," said the Lion to Leonardo with a weary sigh. At that some of the children jumped onto the top of the well and banged onto the heavy lid which sealed it. They did a little war dance up there, whooping and hooting and finally swung the lid open with a terrific clang jumping back with delight at the ruckus it made.



Then they began their pranks again, pushing and shoving each other out of the way to peep naughtily into the well and almost falling in themselves! When Leonardo finally managed to get near the edge, he found himself peering into a well of darkness.

“Is there water down there?” he asked a bit nervously.

“Oh yes, lots and lots!” said the putti trying to scare him. “It's gree-een and slimey - ugh!”

“On the contrary,” contradicted the Lion. “There's not a drop down there! The world has moved on and everything's been modernized these days. Nobody's got any use for these old wells any more ... so I've had them converted for my purposes! It's convenient for me to get around underground and I can reach most parts of the city without being stared at by crowds of tourists or getting locked up in a cage, having my photo taken and so on ...”

Noting the worried look that passed over Leonardo's face, the Lion reassured him saying, “We don't need to use the subterranean passages all the way - just till we reach the magic gondola. It's moored nearby.”

A magic gondola?

They said goodbye to the rowdy children who were now racing around the square chasing each other. They stopped their game for a moment to call out “Come and see us again! Soon!!!” The cheek of it!

The moon shone deep into the well as the lion and Leonardo climbed down foot by foot hanging onto iron holds in the wall. All the while the little pranksters at the top kept crying out Oooh! and Watch it! and Oh, do be careful! until the climbers disappeared from sight. It was a great relief when the naughty things finally closed the lid of the well. The big bronze lid clang shut with a ring and a shudder.

Now they were on their own! As their eyes got more used to the darkness the two were able to see well - and what do you think they saw? Rats!!! Fat furry rats scuttling about furtively. And all the while there was the sound of water gurgling in the water-pipes under the town. It smelt quite strange so they held their noses and scurried on without speaking. Luckily they could soon climb up to the surface again through another of the town's old wells. Unfortunately in so doing, they managed to disturb a number of stray cats who had been prowling around on top of it. They leapt away in a panic, miaowing. One of them snarled and tried to look ferocious, getting it's claws out and arching it's back in a threatening way.

“Sssshhh. Oh, do relax!” Zanzibar whispered very loudly to a great hairy ginger cat who seemed to have some influence over the rest of the gang.

“There's no need to be so jumpy!” he added sharply.

“Oh, Hi Lion,” drawled the ginger cat, feeling a little shame-faced and putting on a bit of a show to try to gloss over his cowardliness. Noticing Leonardo, he looked him up and down.



“I know you, don't I?” he said. “I have several connections in your part of town you know, and am often there on shady business. Aren't you that boy who's forever fooling around in the rain?” he demanded.

“Er ... well... only a bit ... er ... sometimes...” the boy stammered.

“You're always on your own, aren't you! Don't you have any friends at all?”

A scowl passed over Leonardo's face.

“Enough,” he answered a little rudely, “But if you must know, it's the little kittens I like better than anyone!”

“Hmmm ... that's rather interesting,” interrupted a sleek black cat curling up toward them. “In my last life I used to think that a dog's life was it!” He lay down and stretched himself out with a yawn.

“What a very odd thing to say!” said Leonardo deeply puzzled. “Have you had many lives then?”

“I believe this to be my ninth,” the black cat answered with a purr.

He went on to explain: “I've been around rather a long time, you realize. During my previous life, I was quite well-known as a philosopher. Problem was hardly anybody understood what I was talking about! Oh, how they used to tease me! They named me Diogenes the dog - because I slept rough in a wine-barrel at the time and placed little importance on gathering riches. I was happy if I got a meal a day!

I didn't see the point of it all, you see, so I used to go around with a lamp in the daylight explaining to those who asked that I was searching for the meaning of life! It gave people plenty to talk about!

“Alexander the Great was our ruler at the time ... He must have been the wealthiest and greediest man in the world in those days! He became very curious about me... he once visited me at my barrel ... I remember it well. It was a bit chilly on that day but I had managed to find a sunny spot and was just enjoying a quiet snooze when things cooled down suddenly. A great shadow fell across me. I thought a big cloud had blocked the sun. I shivered as I opened my eyes and the great emperor laughed. He teased me about my appalling poverty, saying that even a dog had a coat! Then he tried to tempt me saying he could give me anything I wanted ... anything at all! What a show-off! He was expecting me to beg him to pity me - oh, please, please great emperor, give me a herd of camels or a harem of dancing girls. I just couldn't believe how anyone could be so cock-sure of himself!

But you know, he heard nothing of the kind from me! As a matter of fact, I just wished he would go away! In the end I HAD TO SPELL IT OUT for him and I told him that all I needed was that he should move his important self somewhere else instead of bothering me with his tiresome offers. Who did he think he was? What could he give me? I had all I needed - except the sunlight - at that moment! He was rather shocked and went off rubbing his grubby chin wondering what in the world it could all mean ...

“No”, the well-groomed cat continued, “I must say, I wasn't a bit impressed by big show-offs like him in those days! Of course - erm ... I wasn't a bit like our Carlo here - he certainly believed in leaving his paw-mark on history! Carlo Magno!”

“Hail, King!” yelled out all the other cats teasingly, bowing low from their waists with exaggerated gestures and curtsies. Leonardo swung round to see whom they were bowing to. He faced the big ginger cat. “Charlemagne? Is that who you once were?” he asked with awe. “Why, even I've heard of him - and I only go to school when I have to!”

“Yes,” admitted Carlo rather modestly, “I, ... was He.”

“Well, Leonardo! If it was not at school, where on earth could you have heard of him?” Zanzibar wanted to know.

Leonardo explained: “I was once chatting to someone dressed up in costume for Carnival. He told me that he was the Frankish king Charlemagne who had spoken several languages - although he could hardly read or write!”

“Well, yes, I used to ...” said Carlo meekly, “But now I speak mostly Cat. It's quite a difficult tongue to master - ”

“Come, come,” said the Lion interrupting them suddenly, “Do stop this chit-cat now, we must be on our way!”

So the chatter stopped and the cats sprang up attentively. The Lion spoke briefly to them purring and hissing in cat. He seemed to be giving them some instructions but of course Leonardo couldn't understand a thing! At last they wished the cats goodbye, and strode off across the piazza .



As they turned down a narrow passage, they could hear the felines begin their caterwauling again.

“They're very restless at full moon,” Zanzibar explained. “Sometimes they just howl all night! They're impossible!”

After three more turns, left, right and straight ahead, a canal glistened before them and there floating upon its surface like a golden leaf, they saw a frail and slender gondola.

As they approached it, the surface of the water seemed to liven up. Small waves ran rippling to the water's edge. They seemed to say: “He's coming! He's coming. Zanzibar the Lion is coming!”

And indeed he was.

“My, my, - it's a fine night, isn't it?” the Lion greeted them regally, “How have you all been keeping?”

“Oh, not so bad,” the waves gurgled back shyly. “Do you want us to carry you somewhere? You've only got to say so!”

“I'd like to pay a visit!” the Lion said in what seemed to be a very loud voice. Silence fell all around. Every sleeping bird or animal pricked up its ears and began to listen full of curiosity.

“Of course - as you wish,” said the waves, rippling with pleasure in the moonlight. They lifted the gondola up and brought it gently forward. Leonardo and the Lion stepped briskly in and it glided smoothly away.





The waves whispered happily together. Since they were free to wander about as they pleased they could listen to what everybody was saying and were always full of the latest gossip. They ran up to the merry brown children playing in the sunny squares. They sneaked up on the fishermen chatting at the waterfront and splashed gently. They wandered to the edge of the lagoon where strong currents pulled them far into the sea and there they heard the stories of the fish. They could even eavesdrop on the wild talk of sailors on the big ships.

“And how is my old friend Oceanus?” the Lion wanted to know. “I sometimes hear him calling out to me to drop in for a dip - but I've always got worries on my mind.”

“Matter of fact, he is a bit up and down these days ... unsavoury as old fish at times, you could say!” the waves said sparkling.

“He's as well as can be expected under the circumstances. He never ages, but you know, Venezia certainly does! She's not an easy wife! And she's forever complaining about the damp! As for himself, well, he won't hear a word against it. He's quite in his element in it! But of course things are not as they once were - ”

“Why, the Doge of Venice used to celebrate the wedding of the sea to the land!” they bubbled on ... “He used to ride out in a golden barge and throw a ring of gold out to us every year. He flung it into the deepest part of the lagoon so that everyone would still remember their ancient union!”

“Ah, yes ... I remember those old days well!” the Lion said with a nostalgic sigh. “Venezia is getting on a bit it must be said. Still it's such a shame, she was a striking beauty in her day! The brightest of the bright young things! But the times wear us all down and now she's sinking further and further into the mire and it really will cost a king's ransom to restore her to health.”

“Well yes, but you could say she ages gracefully,” the waves said kindly, chattering on and on ...

The time just flew and by and by, they brought the gondola to rest beneath a dim porch. You could hear the wild cries of seagulls circling overhead and hidden in the shadows someone was waiting. He stepped into the moonlight. It was Zio Franco!

Leonardo gave him a great big hug and Zio Franco wrapped his sky blue cloak around the boy. The two of them looked into each others eyes but they knew that it wasn't the right time for asking or answering any complicated questions right then!

There was a loud crying out in the sky and looking up they could see great flocks of seagulls gathering in the skies and the canal sparkling with reflections of drowsy palaces below. The three neared closer to the water's edge and peeped in. And what do you think they saw below, winding its crooked way down into the canal? A stairway, curled up like a little snake buried under dark fronds of seaweed, slippery and dark.

“We're going down there,” the Lion said to Leonardo's astonishment. Carefully feeling his way with his walking wand, he trod shakily onto the first step and started to descend. The two others followed quickly and the cold, silky waters parted to let them pass.

Down, down, down they went. And the funny thing is that they did not get wet at all. And the other funny thing was, that although they were stepping downward, it felt like they were climbing upward!

Higher and higher inside the reflections of the mysterious palaces they sank. And then suddenly right into one they popped! They climbed a sweeping stairway, on and on until they came to an attic room with a skylight that open onto the midnight sky. They clambered out one by one onto a roof and saw the rather unfamiliar stars in the sky. Everything was now back to front and upside down!

Zanzibar sat pensively down on a chimney pot and turned to Leonardo.

“Where do you think you are?” he asked gravely. Leonardo said that he hadn't the slightest idea.

“I don't think I know where I am,” the boy replied, “I don't really even know where I've come from. In fact I don't understand at all!”

“No, I don't believe you do,” the Lion agreed. “How can you? You live in the upside down world where everything's back to front. It's such an uncomfortable place, I find. Seems to me everyone's always trying to persuade each other to do things they don't feel like doing when they don't feel like doing them instead of all doing what they want to do.”

“Well, most people say they have to put things back in order, you know because -” Leonardo tried to explain and stopped abruptly.

“I understand that you have to be a bit organized for eating and sleeping and such, but you know you really should not go around the way you all do! Fighting like cats every time some one crosses your path with a different perception of a passing situation! Can't you solve your differences in some sensible way?”

“It's always been like that since I was born!” The boy replied stiffly. “I can't help getting cross for one reason or another. It doesn't matter how much I try not to!” he said sadly. “If only I could turn into stone like you and stop feeling like a misfit ...”

“It's no fun being made of stone,” the Lion said with a little shiver. “I'd like to go away too!”

“Where would you go to?” Leonardo asked with understanding. He tried to imagine the little square without the big strong lion's presence.

“Home. Up there,” the Lion said pointing with his paw to the skies above spilling over with their silvery stars.

At that point Zio Franco sat himself right down next to him and threw his sky blue cloak around the grand Lion, determined to stop this melancholy turn. He reminded him that he wasn't simply a stone lion but a representation of something greater. A fixed constellation in the zodiac that roamed around the night sky and steered the course of events toward great deeds of kindness and humanity when things worked well.

But the great gray lion wasn't listening. A tear trickled down his face. “I brought you here to prove to you that your world is upside down,” he said. “Because none of you seem to have noticed!”

Zio Franco rubbed his chin, stood up with a rustle of his cloak and walked off a little way, thinking to himself. He walked around and around in a circle for some time. He seemed to be talking to himself! Then he shook his head in a very puzzled kind of way. He walked slowly back to them, stood in front of Leonardo and said:

“There is something I'd forgotten about for a long time. But I know how to fish it out... Yes, yes, in the far corner, in that fuzzy brain of mine ... Yes, it's all covered in cobwebs. C'mon I'll show you!” He stood up rubbing his eyes as if he'd just woken up.

They trod back over the roof tiles and climbed in again at the skylight of the upside down palace. They were in a dusty attic full of discarded things, an old rocking horse, some battered toys, a sword, some torn flags ... He rubbed his eyes and wandered toward a corner clearing obstacles out of his way and rummaged around till he found what he was looking for. It was an old tin box with a little dragon on it.

He opened it. Inside was a little golden cage made of glass. The door was open. Inside the cage was a beautiful little bird. But the little bird would not step off his perch or fly away although the cage door was wide open. It was afraid to.

And it felt so safe inside the little cage that no one from the great big world could enter!

So thought the little bird.





“But don't you see little bird that anything could happen to your golden cage?” Leonardo cried, “It could fall off its stand and shatter! You could get hurt!” “Not if I stay here very, very still. I won't move and it won't either,” the little bird replied.

“Yes, but don't you see? You're living a life that is not fit for a beautiful flying bird. Won't you try, won't you be brave? Come out. It's not so bad out here,” Leonardo said. “Now will you hop out! Please?”

The little bird hopped out.  
It was the little bird of Hope.

Inside the cage was ... a dusty little something ... “Take it out,” Zio Franco directed Leonardo. The boy was a bit worried that the cage door would snap close and trap him somehow, but then he looked at the big Lion and then at his uncle and all his fear left him. He reached in and pulled the thing out. He had to give it a good dusting before he could see what had lain there all those years.

It was a pair of rainbow coloured wings.

“Put them on!” said his uncle. And Leonardo slipped them carefully onto the little bird who now flew onto his shoulder and perched there. That's the kind of wings they were. Wings for flights of the imagination. Wings for the freeing of Hope.

Smiles rippled across the face of the old stone Lion. The old uncle beamed and the boy burst out laughing!

That night was a very special night for all three of them. Leonardo and Zio Franco had come together to learn from Zanzibar of a great invisible world that lay around them. A wonderful world that could come alive like the little putti. Where a heart of stone became a real heart.

Could they start something off, they wondered? Like a firework that started to explode in a hundred colours? Like a bud that burst into flower and kept on making seeds and new flowers?

They were certainly going to try!

Deep into the sky flew the tiny bird, until it danced on the very stars far in that other sky, below or above, in a future or a past that no one knows, in the deepest deeps of time.

From faraway, Leonardo watched the little bird fly. From one great golden star to another. A bird drawing out the nectar from great golden flowers in the skies.

Where did the little bird come from? And who had made the golden cage?



And who was he himself, really? Where had he sprung from? Was he just another little street waif whom no one really cared about? Maybe. But he was a bit more than that! There was something inside him that could make him just jump for joy even on the rainiest days in the little square of Never Ever, where dreams never came true. And he also knew that he was a little boy, born free as the little bird who should never enter any golden cage of glass and sit there very still inside it. He was like every other little boy and girl splashing in the rain or dancing in a fountain. Always at play somewhere in his bright and sparkling mind, a clever little Somebody who could always run away if someone tried to catch hold of him and hold him fast. Like a raindrop. He thought about that for a bit.

And as for Zio Franco - he was a watchful spirit that lives in kind adults, who somehow never seemed to have enough time to settle all the problems that other grown-ups had started before them. They were always so busy trying to make impossible ends meet! Trying to guide the world and steer the earth through the skies away from all harm. But they had no time to wonder at themselves. And no time at all to play. No Time! How could that be? The one thing they did all have was Time with a capital T!

And Zanzibar?

Zanzibar? Well, Zanzibar the Lion is from beyond the human dimension. Or maybe he's just the figment of someone's imagination. In the fairytale city of Venice he was the symbol of one of the four evangelists - the bringers of good news. He's represented to this day, as a constellation in the zodiac.

But he means even more than that! The night sky is his to roam. The darkness is just a reminder of all the things that are as yet Unknown. He's always someplace between the world of matter of fact and the world of wise dreams that will come true, slipping in and out as he sees fit, keeping his bright eyes open. On earth he loves kind children and helps them when he can. When he's in the skies he guards the heavens.

Leonardo looked up at the stars. He had no rainbow wings to wear to reach them. How should he, a wingless boy, fly free? He looked down sadly. At that moment something fluttered by him and alighted upon his shoulder. It was the little bird. It cocked its head on onto one side and looked at him as if to say, "Yes, but don't you see? You're thinking a thought that is not fit for a beautiful living boy. Won't you try, won't you be brave? Come out. It's not so bad out here. Will you hop out! Please?"

Now where had he heard that before?

And then the Lion said "Now come along! We have to stop this chit chat and be on our way! It's getting on for daylight and we must be back before anyone notices we've been out all night."

Leonardo looked at the little bird. "Will you come with me?" he asked. "Back to the square of Never Ever?"

The little bird cocked his head onto one side and then onto the other. "No," it said firmly, "I certainly will not!" Leonardo's head drooped sadly.

"But I will come with you any where else you want to go!" the little bird piped up, puffing out its small chest boldly.

Leonardo looked at the tiny bird and wondered what had happened to it! Where had he got this new courage from? From trying out its wings, flying out to sip the nectar from great golden flowers in the skies. Going from one great golden star to another. And from finding a friend.

Leonardo, Zanzibar and Zio Franco had met together that time because many children and animals were finding things far too difficult. Leonardo never went back again to that sad place in his heart again. Not to the square of Never Ever. He now knew that nothing had been decided for him and that he could free himself, could look for what he wanted. And he had the little bird of Hope nestling right there, beside him all the way on the journey of his life.

So what happened is that everyone went back home as usual to the little square. The Lion settled back down on his pedestal sitting very still as if he couldn't move. Zio Franco put the kettle on and started to prepare breakfast and Leonardo ran out to the square where all the little kittens were just waking up from their night dreams and just longing to see him just to say hello or - "Miaow...!"

"Who is this little bird?" they asked! "Yummy! Yummy!"

"Now don't you try to eat him!" Leonardo cried. And he sat down right there happily to Explain it All to them.

