

An interview with Toon Tellegen

'Just One More Squirrel'

by Cornald Maas

translated by Lance Salway

Never before has the Amsterdam GP and author, Toon Tellegen, given an interview. Only now that he has been awarded the Golden Slate Pencil he is prepared to do so. Tellegen receives the prize for the best written children's book of 1987 for his collection of animal stories, *Toen niemand iets te doen had* ('When Nobody Had Anything To Do'). A conversation about the compulsiveness of writing.

'Ah,' says the sparrow almost casually to the squirrel, 'you can discover anything if you want to.' Every now and then, in the collection *Toen niemand iets te doen had*, the squirrel tries to do just that. He then goes on a journey, to look for whoever discovered the forest. Or he writes a letter to himself, because he does not know what he should think of his looks. But mostly the squirrel just waits to see where his feet will take him, and he forgets his plans. Sometimes, very occasionally, he does something: the squirrel draws a line in the sand on the river bank and stays on one side of the line: 'This far and no further. Then at least I know where I stand.'

Toon Tellegen (46), who, as was announced last week, was awarded the Golden Pencil for the best written children's book of 1987, also draws similar lines: 'I am delighted with the prize, and I want to talk about it. But only about my children's stories. Not about my poetry, and not about my work as a doctor.' Only the award for *Toen niemand iets te doen had* could entice Toon Tellegen to give this interview. Until now, despite the favourable reception given to the first collection of animal stories, *Er ging geen dag voorbij* ('Not a Day Went By') and six collections of poetry published by Querido, he has avoided any form of publicity. Modesty, and the interests of his patients, seem to be the reason: arrogance is alien to the Amsterdam doctor. 'I got a letter from Imme Dros (who herself received the Woutertje Pieterse Prize and a Silver Pencil for her book, *Annelie In The Depths Of The Night*) - that was really nice. My two children were surprised and astonished as well. The Golden Pencil, that says a lot. They've known this since they were very young.'

The stories which he used to read aloud to his children when they were younger form the basis for the later collections. 'When my daughter was ten years old, I used to tell her stories before she went to sleep at night. They were always about the squirrel; mostly he sat on a branch and then fell off. My daughter named other animals which she wanted in the story; I brought them in, very quickly, tripping

over my own words, the mole, the bat, an elephant. The stories always ended with the squirrel getting into bed and a heartfelt goodnight.’

In 1983 Toon Tellegen decided to write down the stories, often in a rather different form than when he had told them to his daughter. That happened with an astonishing compulsiveness. ‘I decided on a certain technique. None of the stories was to be any longer than 2 A4 sheets. Only one of each of animal might appear, this also applied as far as trees were concerned and, initially, I wanted it to apply even to blades of grass. House pets and humans would not be allowed in the stories. All the animals had to be on the same intellectual level, and live only in the present. No past, no future. Also I committed myself to writing each story within ten minutes. From the 3rd June I wrote a story every day, until I had written exactly 115. So for 115 consecutive days I sat down in the evening and said: ‘Just one more squirrel.’

Sinning

He wrote more animal stories in 1985 and 1987 (for the third collection, the manuscript of which is now with the publisher), with the same discipline: again starting on 3rd June, writing another 115 stories from which a selection was then made.

Yet in the process, Toon Tellegen was sinning against one of his most important rules more and more often: maintaining the complete interchangeability of the characteristics of the animals. ‘I was astonished that I found it increasingly difficult to give the squirrel characteristics which could just as well have belonged to the cricket or the ant. Yet, now and then I would have liked to mix them all up together, just for once.’ That would hardly be possible: apart from the squirrel - who appears most in the stories - the other animals also have individual characters, and what is more, all human characteristics are reflected in them. The badger is moody, the ant is curious, the toad is conceited (‘I intend to fill everything with my presence’.) They live in the same wood and are all the same size. The butterfly and the giraffe lie next to one another in bed, the ant and the squirrel, arms linked, look at the sparkling waves.

Sometimes they are tormented by doubts and uncertainties, and when Toon Tellegen describes them he refers to elements in his poetry (which - unlike his animal stories - often take him ‘hours and hours’ to write). In his collections of poetry he writes of travels without purpose, of doubt being given preference over certainty and understanding. In *De andere ridders* (‘The Other Knights’), Tellegen writes:

Sometimes I take myself somewhere to sit under a line,
But I know not under which

And under this line it is darker and dimmer,

Then I think that everything will stay as it always is,
But I don’t know how everything always is.

Toon Tellegen's children's stories are rather less melancholy. The animals are generally resigned to their doubts and they don't ruminate for too long over the thoughts and words which slip past them. They celebrate without occasion, the inexplicable is acceptable. And if one morning, 'everything looks different,' the animals are already used to it by evening. The elephant has a snout, the carp has red legs and dreams of the strangest things at night. 'The stickleback dreams that he can swim. How wonderful! he dreams. I can swim!'

Even the most radical changes don't seem to have any affect and, as a result of the fact that mostly absolutely nothing happens, the languorous atmosphere feeling becomes even more pronounced. 'This atmosphere speaks for itself,' says Tellegen, 'until now I have always written the stories in the summer holidays, in warm weather, during balmy summer evenings. Even the stories which are set in winter were written during the summer.'

Violent stomach ache

After some hesitation Tellegen tells how some of the finest stories from *Toen niemand iets te doen had* were inspired by an incident during a journey to the Soviet Union in the summer of 1985. 'I was alone, in Leningrad I boarded the night train to Lake Onega. When I arrived there at six o'clock in the morning, in the pouring rain, I had severe stomach pain. As a doctor I thought I recognised the symptoms of gastric bleeding. I doubled up from the pain; I thought I must get to the hospital. But at the same time I realised that there would not be anyone there who would be able to understand me. I would have to try to hang on. At eleven o'clock a guide would come and pick me up, so I had five hours to go, and I was not allowed to go back to my room in the dilapidated hotel where I was waiting. I had to force myself to look for something to take my mind off the pain: so, in the foyer of the hotel I wrote some fourteen stories, enough for two weeks ahead.'

Among the stories which Tellegen wrote then is the one in which the ant and the squirrel discuss what happens when you are seriously ill. 'Nothing really. You always get better.' And the story in which they resolve not to see each other for a time because they want to find out what missing is. 'Missing is something which you feel when something is not there.' Tellegen: 'I was fairly pathetic then. I had already written a farewell letter. There I was, absolutely isolated, well aware that it was impossible for anyone to come in who I would know. But the next day, when I travelled back to Leningrad and the pain had subsided, it turned out that everyone of my fellow travellers had been ill too. We had all eaten something that was off.'

Sentimental

Tellegen visited Russia for sentimental reasons; his mother was Russian by birth. Shortly after her death he decided to look for the street where his mother 'had skipped around as a small child'; he had his hair cut at the barber's on the first floor of the house where she had been born. His mother had come to the

Netherlands with her parents in 1918 when she was nineteen years old.

‘My grandfather had a shop in Leningrad. In contrast to my parents, who had little or no little interest in prose or poetry, he was very interested in literature. In fact he wanted to be a writer too.’ The doctor, who experienced the same thing many years later, continued: ‘He wrote poetry, stage plays, and also stories about animals, for children. I heard many of these stories as a child. They were told to me by my uncle. They were amusing short stories. I had to name the animal which rhymed with the last word of the previous sentence.’

Tellegen attributes his great interest for Russian literature to the early history of his mother and grandfather. ‘After Greek and Roman classics, it’s what I like to read most. There is something special in Russian literature which really appeals to me. The use of diminutives, which I like very much, the melancholy... When I think of the squirrel and the ant, of the place where they live, then I think: that is somewhere in Russia.’

Toon Tellegen was born in 1941 in Den Briel. His father was a general practitioner there and Tellegen decided to study medicine too. After studying and qualifying at Rotterdam he specialised in surgery and obstetrics. After this Toon Tellegen went to Kenya for three and a half years. He worked in a hospital in Kilgoris, and whilst he was there he came into contact with the Massai, a Kenyan tribe. ‘I went into the bush with a taperecorder and recorded animal stories told by the old Massai people. They are different to my animal stories, more idiosyncratic. They always end badly, and count as a sort of warning.’

Elephant

Tellegen quotes the story which he heard a parent tell to children. The story, about an elephant who is taken in by a hare, made a great impression on him. ‘The hare escapes from the elephant and asks a passing baboon not to give him away to the elephant. The baboon agrees to this. When the elephant arrives there a little later the baboon asks him for a little blood. The elephant - after some hesitation - agrees, but there is a hole in the dish into which the blood pours. The elephant doesn’t realise this and becomes weaker and more and more dizzy and finally bleeds to death. The hare, who drops by a little later, thanks the baboon pleasantly. A gruesome story.’

Tellegen has his doubts as to whether he was inspired by the Massai stories. He does not shrink from emotion and grief in his collections, but he will not be sarcastic: ‘I avoid cynicism. I don’t want the animals in my stories to humiliate each other. That does not appeal to me. When I was young I preferred to read *Winnie The Pooh* and *The Wind In The Willows* (by Kenneth Graham) because of the friendly, warm atmosphere which they evoked, and the expressive language used. As if the animals are forever spinning tales.’ In the collections *Er ging geen dag voorbij* and *Toen niemand iets te doen had* (with striking linocuts by Mance Post) Tellegen writes expressively and poetically. This style, together with the often open ending of the stories, gives the collections more than just the

character of a children's book. The stories are also suitable, or perhaps even more suitable, for adults. 'I certainly don't think of children when I write these stories,' says Tellegen, 'I just think of the task which I have set myself: one story per day.'

Suspicion

Yet he gets the impression that his stories do have more than a passing appeal for children. In one of the stories he lets the squirrel reflect on the word suspicion. 'Suspicion, he thought, what is suspicion? Could it be a kind of soup? It sounds like a black sort of soup with chunks of something or other in it...' Later Toon Tellegen heard that one of his nephews recognised that straightaway: 'When his mother read it to him he called out: I've always thought that too! Black soup!' Tellegen says that he uses that kind of word very consciously: 'When I was a child I was thrilled when I overheard a word in a conversation that I didn't know. I imagined all kinds of meanings for it, made myself all kinds of pictures from it and then, sometimes, coming back to it several years later, found that it meant something very different to what I had thought. I like to play around like that in my stories. They are mild misinterpretations.'

According to the logic of Tellegen's animal stories you can scratch off suspicion, break scents and grief can become so great that it falls on top of you 'like a sort of pudding'.

He nods approvingly: 'When I was a child and I heard that Saint Nicholas did not exist, I could not believe it. In one of my stories a snail flies, an elephant stands on his trunk...' Tellegen bends over and lays his head almost on his knees, 'then I press my head down, and I think, that's fantastic. It's not possible, it really isn't possible that he can do that!'

If the pedantic sparrow in *Toen niemand iets te doen had* could see the elephant standing on his trunk, he would not be satisfied just to see it: he would ask how and why. But the doctor who scarcely wants it known that he is also a poet and - since a short time ago - an acclaimed writer of children's books, needs no explanation, but prefers to doubt and be surprised. Isn't that the squirrel speaking there, who leaves most questions unanswered? The animal who withdraws to his tree branch, enjoys nature, and dozes. And he says: 'I close my eyes, and what happens then is always wonderful.'

Sample Translation

Tony

(Teunis)

by Toon Tellegen

(Amsterdam: Querido, 1996)

Translated by Lance Salway

One afternoon Tony and his mother went into town to buy a coat. It was September.

They went into a clothes shop. There were no other customers. A lady came up to them.

‘Can I help you?’ she asked.

‘I’d like a winter coat, please,’ said Tony’s mother and she pointed to him.

The lady crossed to a rail and held a thick black coat in front of Tony.

‘Is this the sort of thing?’ she asked.

‘Try it on first,’ said his mother.

Tony tried to get into the coat but he couldn’t. The coat tore.

‘No, that one’s too small,’ his mother said.

The lady picked out another coat.

Tony pulled this coat on and once again the sleeves tore.

‘What do you think you’re doing?’ the lady shouted angrily.

‘We’re elephants,’ his mother said quietly.

‘Elephants, elephants...’ said the lady. ‘What am I supposed to do about that?’ She sighed. ‘I’ve only got one larger size.’

She took an enormous red coat from the rail. But Tony couldn’t get this coat on either. He did his very best. He wrestled with the coat, pushing and shaking and pulling the sleeves until the coat hung on his body in shreds. The lady looked as though she was about to explode.

Tony and his mother stood there, feeling very embarrassed.

‘My collection!’ the lady cried. ‘My entire winter collection!’

The remains of three jackets lay on the floor.

‘What size can you possibly be?’ she cried.

‘Elephant size,’ said Tony’s mother.

‘Elephant size?’ said the lady. ‘An impossible size!’

‘Yes,’ Tony’s mother said quietly.

Tony tugged her tail with his trunk. He wanted to go.

But the lady wasn't giving up yet. She pulled a curtain from the shop window and wrapped it round Tony. And then she tied a belt around him.

Tony couldn't begin to think what he must look like, in the green curtain.

But I'm not going to cry, he thought. I'll never do that.

'That looks lovely, gorgeous!' the lady shrieked. 'It's just the right size!' Her voice cracked.

The curtain rod was hanging at an angle. Some of the curtain rings had fallen on the floor and were lying among the remains of the three coats.

'How much do I owe you?' asked Tony's mother. 'For everything.'

The lady suddenly began to sob. She covered her face with her hands and sat down on a stool. Tony tugged his mother's tail again as hard as he could.

'I'm sorry,' his mother said. 'I'm sorry.'

Then the lady looked up and smiled at her through her tears. 'What would you say to a nice cup of tea?' she asked.

'Yes, please,' said Tony's mother.

The lady hung a little board that said *Closed* on the door, and led Tony and his mother to a room at the back of the shop.

Before long they were sitting drinking tea. Tony was still wearing the thick green curtain.

His mother told the lady about the advantages and disadvantages of elephantship. That's what she called it. 'Sometimes it's difficult,' she said. 'And sometimes it's easy.' The lady nodded and told her about the advantages and disadvantages of a clothes shop.

Tony thought about that word: elephantship. Was there such a thing as peopleship, he thought, and boyship and ladyship? He had never heard of them before.

He felt like standing up in his green curtain and running straight through the door, up the street, through the town, and out into the fields. To the cows and their cowship. And the sheep and their sheepship.

'There's nothing you can do about it, is there?' said the lady.

‘No,’ said his mother.

They took their leave of the lady. They didn’t have to pay anything and the lady waved them goodbye.

When they had turned the corner, Tony pulled the green curtain over his head, rolled it up and hurled it over a hedge into a garden.

‘What are you doing now?’ asked his mother.

Tony said nothing. He knew for certain that he looked very odd in that curtain. If he wore that curtain no one would want to be his friend, certainly not for ever.

‘Tell you what, I’ll *make* a coat for you,’ said his mother.

On Wednesday afternoon Tony went for his music lesson.

First he had to try and play the recorder, but he couldn’t hold the recorder very easily, and all those little holes, what was he going to cover them with?

Then the music lady said: ‘Would you like to play the piano?’

He sat down on a stool but he couldn’t manage to hit fewer than twenty notes at the same time.

‘That isn’t music,’ said the lady. ‘That’s noise.’

Tony felt very unhappy.

‘I haven’t got any fingers,’ he said.

‘That’s true,’ said the lady. ‘How very awkward.’

When no one was looking, he crept inside a cupboard.

I’ll be all right in here, he thought.

A boy tried to play the trumpet. Well, I can do *that*! Tony thought. And he began to trumpet very loudly.

‘Who’s playing in there?’ asked the lady.

‘I am,’ said Tony, and he threw open the door of the cupboard and trumpeted a song.

‘Very nice,’ said the lady.

She asked if Tony would like to trumpet while a little girl played the piano.

‘All right,’ said Tony.

The little girl started to play and Tony began to trumpet. But he was so loud that the little girl fell over backwards, the lady crept under a table, and the pictures on the wall were knocked sideways.

After that he wasn't allowed to trumpet again.

'I know,' said the lady. 'You can play the drum.'

She gave Tony a drum and he began to beat it with his trunk.

'If you drum in there, then we can hear it in here,' said the lady. She showed Tony into an empty room.

All afternoon and all the Wednesday afternoons that followed, Tony drummed up and down the empty room, from one wall to the other and back again. Every now and then he trumpeted at the same time. When he did that, the lady peered round the corner and said: 'Drumming only.'

At the end of the afternoon she always said: 'You're coming along. You're coming along very nicely.'

Perhaps I'll become the best drummer in the world, thought Tony.

He liked drumming more than running and standing on his head. And he liked drumming almost as much as walking through a door at top speed. But then, he had never ever done that.

One hot Sunday, in the summer, Tony and his mother went to the beach.

It was very crowded. People were walking and lying everywhere.

They found a small stretch of sand, close to the water, where they could sit down.

After a while Tony ran into the sea and dived straight into the surf. He was dragged back to the beach by the waves, and then he ran back again. This is wonderful, he thought.

Later on he came out of the water and began to dig a hole beside his mother. When he had finished, only his trunk could be seen peeping over the edge of the hole.

After that he stood on his head and fell over backwards.

His mother had brought with her some oak leaves and thick slices of chestnut bark. They ate these.

A ball rolled towards them. He gave it a huge kick. The ball flew over the heads of hundreds of people. A couple of boys stood and watched.

‘You can kick a long way,’ they said.

‘Yes, but then, I’m an elephant,’ said Tony.

‘That’s true,’ said the boys, ‘but it’s a long way just the same.’

‘Yes,’ said Tony. ‘It was a good shot all right.’

He built a castle and dug a moat around it. He squirted the moat full of water with his trunk. But the castle suddenly collapsed.

‘Ooooh!’ said Tony. His mother had been asleep and she opened her eyes. She looked at the hill of sand.

‘What’s that?’ she asked.

‘A ruin,’ said Tony.

‘How lovely,’ said his mother.

Tony went and sat in the hole and fell asleep. It had become very hot.

When he woke up, there was a note lying beside the hole. Tony read it. In big letters it said: ‘I wish that I was an elephant too.’

Tony looked around. Who could have written it? The beach was still very crowded. But no one was looking in his direction. He folded the note carefully. He wouldn’t show it to his mother. She was asleep, with a newspaper over her face. I’ll keep it, he thought. It’s definitely a secret letter.

At the end of the afternoon they set off home again. They trudged through the sand.

‘Are we coming again next week?’ Tony asked.

‘I don’t see why not,’ said his mother.

He put the letter away in a safe place. He often unfolded it and read it when he was alone in his room.

It must be from a little girl. He could see that it was little girl’s writing. He wrote elephant writing.

But what if she knew that she could never have peanut butter and chocolate pudding again, he thought, and could never thread cotton through a needle again or slip through a narrow doorway, and could never hum again or run her fingers through her hair? Would she still want to be an elephant then? That's what I'd really like to know, he thought.

Then he folded the letter once more and hid it in a crack between two floorboards behind his bed.

One afternoon in the autumn, when the wind was blowing hard and the streets were full of people, Tony suddenly saw another elephant in the crowd.

He began to run, pushing people to one side and running between the cars.

'Hello!' he shouted.

He caught up with the elephant at long last and tapped him on the shoulder with his trunk.

'Hello,' he said.

The elephant turned and looked at Tony in surprise.

'Yes?' he said. 'What is it?'

'You're an elephant too,' said Tony.

'Are you addressing me?' asked the elephant.

'Yes,' said Tony. He looked round. There were no other elephants to be seen.

'You mean to say that I'm an elephant?' asked the elephant.

'Yes,' said Tony. 'That's exactly what I mean.' But he no longer felt as cheerful as he did when he first came running up.

'What gives you that idea?'

'Well,' said Tony. 'You've got a trunk, haven't you?'

The elephant rolled up his trunk and stuffed it in his mouth.

'I mosht shertainly do not have a trunk,' he lisped.

'So what's this, then?' Tony tapped the top of the trunk.

'Oh,' said the elephant. 'That is my noshe. I have a shpecial noshe.'

'And what about your ears?' Tony asked.

The elephant snatched a little hat from under his left foreleg, folded up his ears and hid them under the hat.

‘What’sh wrong with my earsh?’ he asked.

Tony suddenly felt very sad, and he was cold now too. He wished that he was at home.

‘If you aren’t an elephant, then what are you?’ he asked.

The elephant cleared his throat, ‘I am a pershon,’ he said. He was having difficulty keeping the trunk in his mouth.

Tony said nothing.

‘Good day, young man,’ said the elephant, and he turned and walked away.

‘I’m not a young man,’ Tony muttered. But the elephant couldn’t hear him.

It was a grey day and it was starting to rain. People put up their umbrellas and began to hurry. Music was coming from the shops.

Tony strolled home. He was an elephant, he thought to himself. I’m sure of it.

When he got home he told his mother what had happened.

His mother said nothing.

‘How can he possibly think that he’s a person?’ he asked. His mother shrugged her great, grey shoulders.

‘Are we the only elephants living round here?’ he asked.

‘No,’ said his mother.

‘Where are the other elephants then?’

‘I don’t know.’

That evening Tony sat at the window and watched the people cycling and walking past. Boys in the street asked if he was going out to play. But he didn’t feel like it.

At first he was very angry with the other elephant and thought: if I meet him again, I’ll bump into him so hard that his trunk will fly out of his mouth. And then I’ll grab his trunk and never let go, so that he won’t be able to put it back again. And I’ll ask: Do you still think that you’re a person? And I’ll carry on until he says no.

But later on he wasn't angry with the elephant any more and wanted to see him again. Perhaps next time he would say he was an elephant, of his own accord. That might happen, mightn't it? Or would he always think it was an awful thing to be an elephant?

'Is it awful to be an elephant?' he called over his shoulder to his mother.

'Of course not,' said his mother. 'It isn't awful at all. It's ordinary.'

It's ordinary, thought Tony, that was it. That's what he would tell that elephant if he saw him again: it's ordinary to be an elephant, it's perfectly ordinary.

'And a person with folded ears and a trunk in his mouth, is that ordinary?' he asked.

'No,' said his mother. 'That isn't ordinary at all. That's quite out of the ordinary.'

You are quite out of the ordinary, that's what I'll say to him, thought Tony. But perhaps he *wants* to be out of the ordinary...

It was growing dark and Tony was still looking out of the window.

'Off to bed with you,' said his mother.

I don't want to be out of the ordinary, he thought. Ever. I know that for sure.

He shuffled slowly out of the room, down the hall, and up the stairs.

One afternoon, as he was walking home from school, Tony was feeling cross. He thought about his father, who was still busy looking for undiscovered people. He couldn't have found any yet, he thought, otherwise he'd come home.

He thought, too, about the elephants in the zoo, who never went out into the street and never learned to talk and read. And he thought about the elephants in the book from the cupboard, who could swing from high places, like gutters and steeples. He didn't believe any of that.

Then he thought about the elephant he'd met who had said that he was a person. He came to the street where he had seen that elephant. He looked round but he could only see people. He turned down a side street.

After crossing two more streets he didn't know where he was. Now I'm lost, he thought. The street was crowded. People pushed him aside, trod on his feet, pushed his trunk out of the way. 'Watch out,' they said. Or: 'Can't you look where you're going?'

Tony wasn't cross any more. Now I'm feeling sad, he said.

He saw a boy from his class. He quickly hid in a doorway. I don't want to see anyone, he thought. I don't want to see anyone ever again.

He walked into a dark shop. He had seen through the window that there were no customers inside. It was a shop with old books. Piles of books were lying everywhere.

Tony looked first at a book about animals. He saw pictures of elephants. But he wasn't interested in those. Then he saw a thick book, with a black cover, on which was written in golden letters: 'How To Become a Person.'

He opened the book. The first chapter was called: 'Think Like a Person.'

Yes, thought Tony, but that's easier said than done... I could do it easily if I was a person... He started to read the opening of the chapter but it was all about insights and procedures. He didn't understand any of it.

He turned a few more pages. The second chapter was called: 'Feeling Like a Person.' He looked at the first page of that chapter. There were all sorts of words that he didn't understand. He turned some more pages. At the end of the book he read: 'There is really nothing difficult about becoming a real person. If you truly want it, you will always succeed.'

He put the book back. He was feeling very unhappy. At the back of the shop the owner was sitting reading. He hadn't seen Tony.

Tony went out of the shop. There is really nothing difficult about it... he thought. Yes, yes. But what about my trunk? And my ears?

The street was even more crowded than before. People pushed him right over. He fell on the ground and grazed his trunk. He could taste blood.

Am I going to cry? he asked himself. The tears had already begun to well up, right behind his eyes.

No, he thought. He shook his head and got to his feet.

I can run and push past everyone too, he thought. I can do that. I'm just as strong as my forefather. They threw boiling pitch at him... But then I'd never be silent again either. Never, never again.

By now he was well and truly lost.

The shops were beginning to close. He sat down on a step. Now I'm really going to cry, he thought. Two tears rolled down his cheeks.

Someone cycled up to him. 'Tony!' a voice called. It was a little girl from his class.

'Hi!' said Tony.

She got off her bike.

'What are you doing here?' she asked.

Tony's cheeks started to burn and he quickly dried the two tears with a puff of air from his trunk.

'Oh, I'm just taking a walk,' he said. 'I do it quite often.'

'Are you on your way home?' the little girl asked.

'Yes,' said Tony. 'I'll end up there sooner or later.'

'Do you want to climb on the back? I'm going that way too.'

'All right.'

Tony tried to sit on the carrier but he was too heavy. The bike tipped over backwards.

'Let me do the pedalling,' he said.

Before long he was pedalling and the little girl was sitting on the back. She put her arm round his middle and rested her head on his back.

He wished that they both lived on the other side of the world so that he would have to pedal on for ever and ever.