

MILLY ON THE LILY PAD



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Imagine, the biggest, darkest, scariest forest you've ever stood in, with tree's so tall and bushy that they block out all the light on the ground below, and where the animals creep around in the darkness, making strange noises.

Now, imagine the opposite of that.

One that isn't dark or scary, it's just lovely; a big friendly forest where the only strange noise you can hear is laughter.

That forest is Zen Forest, and its where Poppy and Zander live.

Poppy is a Polar Bear and Zander is a Gander, which is a male Goose – it's important you know that. Zander likes to make sure everyone knows that.

Polar Bears and Ganders normally don't live in forests, but this is Zen, and things are different here.

“Did you glue the wheels on my roller blades again?” Poppy the Polar Bear asked Zander the Gander, more than a little miffed. She threw her helmet onto the floor and tore off her knee pads in disgust.

Zander was too busy twirling around his cramped hide with his winner’s trophy. It was a toilet plunger used to unblock drains with a dolls head sellotaped on top, but to Zander it was the most special thing in the world.

“You cheated again Zander,” Poppy fumed, “when are you going to stop sabotaging my stuff?”

“Sore loser,” Zander dismissed Poppy’s claim. He placed the plunger into a plant pot carefully, like it was a glass vase, and kissed the scary sellotaped head. “See you tomorrow beautiful”, he whispered.

“There’s a famous saying about cheating,” continued Poppy, “winners never cheat, and cheaters never swim”.

“I don’t think that’s correct Miss 2nd Place,” Zander politely informed her, “it’s winners never cheat, and cheaters never win, which is untrue cos I just won ...again!”

To Zander, winning was everything. It didn’t matter how he won, just so long as he did.

Poppy wedged herself into Zander’s tiny armchair, her big body almost swallowed it up.

“I need your help today,” she said, changing the subject, “well, it’s someone else needs *our* help”.

Zander walked over to his cowboy outfit hanging on a hook.

“What seems to be the trouble, ma’am” he said in his best Cowboy accent, adjusting the hat on his head.

“We need Zander the Gander for this one”, Poppy informed him, “not Zander the Cowboy, Zander the Racing Car Driver or Zander the Policeman”.

“Oh, right then,” Zander returned his cowboy hat to the hook beside his crash helmet and policeman’s hat. “So, I need to think like a Gander for this part ... hmmm – how does a Gander think?”, he asked aloud.

“Zander ... you are a Gander”.

“Oh yeah,” Zander replied, “I forgot about that”.

Later that morning ...

Poppy took Zander to meet the poor animal in desperate need of his help.

On the way, Zander thought of the different animals it could be. Maybe it was a Deer stuck in a fence? Or a mountain cat clinging onto a ledge for dear life? Or a Tyrannosaurus Rex with its head stuck in a fishbowl?

“Don’t be ridiculous Zander” he laughed to himself, “there are no fences in Zen Forest”.

As they reached the forest pond, Poppy stopped and waved towards the water.

“Hi Milly!” she yelled excitedly, “I’ve brought my friend I was telling you about.”

Zander looked on as a teeny tiny frog on a teeny tiny lily pad, waved her teeny tiny arm back at Poppy.

“She doesn’t look like she’s in serious danger,” remarked Zander, a little confused.

“He doesn’t look like a Champion Diver”, remarked Milly, a little disappointed.

Poppy sighed.

“Milly needs someone to teach her how to dive into water,” she explained.

“What kind of frog can’t dive in?” Zander engaged his mouth before his brain again. Milly didn’t reply, she just stared at her embarrassed reflection in the water.

“Zander!” snapped Poppy, “think before you speak”.

“Sorry Milly,” he mumbled apologetically, “how can I help you?”

“I told Milly you can teach her to dive!” whooped Poppy, “who better than Zander the Gander?”

Zander’s eyes widened to the size of dinner plates.

“I can’t do that,” he said, “I have no goggles”.

“Yes, you do!” Poppy opened her giant paw to reveal Zander’s goggles.

“Well, I don’t have flippers” said Zander.

“You’ve got webbed feet,” replied Milly.

“I can’t swim!” Zander covered his beak with his wings, like he was trying to shove the words back inside before anyone heard them. But it was too late, he’d spilled the beans.

“You can’t swim!” shouted Milly, “what kind of Gander can’t swim?”

Zander didn't reply; it was his turn to stare at his embarrassed reflection in the water.

"Of course, you can," Poppy replied in disbelief, "I've seen you swim, like that time ..." her words trailed to nothing as Poppy realised, she'd never seen Zander in the water.

"Well, this isn't going very well", Milly eventually broke the uneasy silence, "we've got a frog that can't dive and a Gander that can't swim".

"As we all know, I'm a terrific actor," said Zander. Milly laughed but managed to cover it with a cough. "So, one day I got in the water and acted like I could swim."

"What happened?" asked Poppy.

"I sank".

Milly leapt onto the grass beside them both.

"I know what to do," she said, bouncing between the webbed feet and the giant paws, "Poppy can teach me to dive and I'll teach Zander to swim".

Zander looked scared.

"It'll be alright Zander," Poppy placed a reassuring paw onto his head, it covered his eyes and his beak, "I'll be here the whole time, you'll be safe".

Zander took a long, deep breath like he was trying to inflate himself with courage.

"Right, where do we start?".

Poppy stood on top of the branch and tried to ignore the sound of it cracking under her weight.

“I will now demonstrate how a Polar Bear dives,” she informed Milly, “now watch closely.”

Zander stood at the side of the pond wearing two inflatable armbands on each wing and a rubber ring around his waist, just for added safety. Nervously, he moved back from the splash zone.

Poppy sprang from the branch with her arms out to the side. Zander and Milly watched in amazement as she forward rolled in mid-air, brought her arms above her head, and entered the water like an arrow. She made the smallest of small plops.

“Wow,” yelled Milly as she leapt around on her lily pad, “that was awesome”.

“It’s impossible,” Zander looked completely flabbergasted, “a pebble makes a bigger splash”.

Poppy shook the water from her giant head.

“Okay, your turn,” she said, “but don’t think about the water, only think about diving over this-”

Poppy stretched her long arm out in front of the lily pad.

“I can’t see the water now,” said Milly.

“That’s good,” Poppy smiled, “now just concentrate on diving over my arm.”

“I’m scared,” replied Milly.

In times like these, Poppy always knew a good saying that would help.

“As the saying goes,” she replied reassuringly, “the only thing you have to fear, is fleas and elves”.

Zander slapped his forehead with his wing.

“It’s not that,” he interrupted, “it’s `the only thing you have to fear is fear itself’. It means don’t let fear hold you back.”

“That’s what I meant,” said Poppy, “now take a deep breath Milly and just dive over my arm”.

Milly clenched her little frog fists, crouched low, and with all the power she had in her legs, sprung up and over Poppy’s, and went head-first into the water. Instantly, Poppy and Zander yelled with delight.

“You did it, Milly!” screamed Zander, “that was a perfect dive!”

They watched as Milly emerged from beneath the water wearing the biggest smile.

“Hey Bob!” she yelled up into the trees, “did you see my dive?”

Poppy looked up to see a small monkey wearing 4 sweatshirts and a pair of underpants over his trousers, swing through the trees.

“No, I didn’t,” he yelled back, “have you seen my clothes?”

Poppy looked bewildered.

“That’s odd,” she thought, “I wonder why that little monkey is wearing all those clothes.”

“Okay Zander it’s your turn now,” Milly swam towards the scared looking Gander in the arm bands, her powerful legs pushing her through the water quickly.

“I-I-I think we’ve all had enough excitement today,” he stammered, something he often did when he felt pressure. “Let’s all come back tomorrow ... or not.”

Milly clambered from the water.

“The only thing you have to fear, is fear itself,” Milly quoted Zander’s words to him, “so come on, let’s get you in the water scaredy cat.”

“Gander!” replied Zander.

“Whatever”.

Zander tip-toed into the water, the whole time Milly clasped his wing for added reassurance. Across the pond, Poppy returned to her favourite branch which was still struggling to hold her weight.

“That’s the spirit Zander,” she whooped, “we won’t let anything happen to you.”

Milly opened the air valve on the rubber ring around his waist to let the air out.

“What are you doing?!” Zander freaked, “I’ll sink!”

As the last of the air escaped from the float, Milly pointed to his legs under the water. Zander looked down to see that his legs were paddling, keeping him afloat.

“Would you look at that,” he couldn’t quite believe it, “I’m swimming”.

“It’s your natural instincts Zander,” answered Milly, “and you’re not swimming, you’re floating. Your legs help you to stay afloat *and* to swim.”

Milly swam to the centre of the pond.

“Okay Zander, try and swim to me.”

Before Zander could attempt it, a loud wooden snap filled the air as the branch beneath Poppy’s feet finally gave up its struggle, and Poppy dropped to the water below. What happened next wasn’t a splash, it was a Tsunami. The wave caused by Poppy’s belly flop quickly rose and rolled across the water towards Zander. It threw Milly into the air – like she’d been bounced from an inflatable – and onto Zander’s beak.

“Hold your breath!” she told him, before the large wave crashed over their heads and sent them twirling under the water. Zander rolled with the waves and the bubbles and came up further down the pond, spitting water from his beak.

“Gander down, Gander down!” he yelled, over-reacting ever so slightly. As he shook the last droplets of water from his face, his eyes suddenly fixed on something in the water moving fast towards him. It was sticking out above the surface and closing in.

“Shark!!” he screamed, “that’s a fin - there’s a shark in the pond!”

Zander kicked his legs as hard as he could, forcing him away from the cold-blooded killer who fancied Gander for dinner.

“Zander!”

He could hear Poppy yelling, but he never turned around.

“Look Zander you’re swimming!” shouted Milly.

“I’m not swimming – I’m fleeing!” Zander screamed as he shot past her towards the safety of dry land. He

hauled himself from the water and waddled onto the grass.

“Zander!”

Poppy was still trying to get his attention. Zander turned to see Poppy standing in the centre of the pond. A large chunk of tree branch was wrapped around her waist and stuck up from her back. She turned sideways and pointed over her shoulder.

“It’s not a shark fin,” she laughed, “it was this branch, I was coming to save you.”

Milly fell back onto her lily pad in a fit of giggles. Zander looked embarrassed but a little relieved. Eventually, he got back into the water and swam to Poppy.

“You’re swimming,” she smiled from ear to ear as Zander approached her. He looked pleased with himself.

“Of course,” he replied, “I just needed the right motivation.” Poppy floated on her back with her arms behind her head.

“You were right all along Zander,” she told him.

“I know,” replied Zander, “right about what?”

“I said cheaters never swim, and you said that wasn’t correct, and you were right because you’re a little cheater and now you can swim.”

Milly giggled but Zander didn’t answer, he just placed his wing into Poppy’s hand, closed his eyes, and enjoyed the warmth of the sun on his beak.

That was the day Zander learned to swim and Milly learned to dive.

And what a day it was.

Zander learned a lot that day. He learned that although it's good to win, it's better to win the right way; to feel like you've really achieved something rather than cheating or pretending your way to victory.

And to be thoughtful of other people's feelings. To think before you speak and never say anything to someone that would hurt *your* feelings if they said it to *you*. It's easy to rush in and just say what you're thinking, but being a good friend means you take the time to make sure your words don't hurt those you care about.

It can also be scary to face your fears, but if you don't talk to someone about them, then your fears get bigger inside your head.

When you open-up to a friend about something that you're afraid of, it makes your fears shrink, and with their help, eventually the fear disappears.

Friends beat fears, all day, every day.



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