



Entrance Examination (5e)

The Kiss of Life

How do you give a hedgehog the kiss of life? I shrank from the call to heroism. Unhappily I took stock of that sharp snout under its helmet of spikes. Little piggy eyes were closed. Only a tremble of whiskers, a faint shudder in its thistly belly, revealed that life still ticked under that armour-plating.

It was waterlogged. My son had come into the kitchen looking baffled. 'It isn't easy,' he announced, 'giving a hedgehog artificial respiration. It's like kneading a gorse bush.'

He had gone to scoop leaves off the swimming pool. There it was, floating like a mine awaiting a ship to blow it up. It saddened me. That pool continues to take an almost unacceptable toll of shrews and wood mice and other small night-time wanderers which topple in and then can't pull themselves out.

It is not that hedgehogs cannot swim: they can and do, without grudge or grumble. But having tipped off the coping during darkness, this one must have exhausted itself clawing with its stubby legs at the high smooth sides. Motionless, with legs now spreadeagled, it had looked very drowned.

Yet when hauled out it feebly attempted to curl into the usual defensive shape of a conker shell. Now it was stretched on its side. The family stood gazing down, mourners at a death bed...

... Action was needed. It must be dried out, like a drunk picked from a skidrow gutter. A grocery carton was lined with newspaper. The corpse was gingerly lifted inside. It was borne, as though in a coffin, into the scullery and put on an airing cupboard shelf with a saucer of warm milk near its nose.

I didn't expect it to survive. Soon the fleas would desert their sunken ship and make for the piles of freshly ironed clothes. Do not be censorious about the hedgehog's lousiness. Imagine being neckless and trying to dislodge parasites from ten thousand horny spines. You would shrug philosophically and likewise learn to live with fleas.

Later a scuffling and scratching caught my ear as I was carrying dishes to the sink. I opened the cupboard door upon a gust of hot air. Revived, the hedgehog was trying to jailbreak. It looked as lively as any hedgehog can hope to look.

I took the box outside on to the lawn and turned it on its side. At a top two mph the convalescent shuffled out and paused uncertainly for a second. Hedgehogs have poor sight, so rely mostly on hearing and smell. With nose at carpet-sweeper level, he moved towards the shrubbery behind the yew hedge.

He seemed to have picked up the scent of familiar ground, his hunting range for young voles and toads and spiders. I stood in the twilight and listened to him snuffling and crashing through the sun-withered stems and the first sprinkle of autumn leaves: there was a reassuring firmness about the step.

In the Country
Kenneth Allsop

QUESTIONS AND ANALYSIS

1. Pick out some sentences from the story that suggest that the author and his family did not expect the hedgehog to survive.
2. Find and write down the words and phrases that describe the hedgehog and how it behaves.
3. Why do you think the author went to so much trouble to save the hedgehog?
4. What does he mean when he says: "It looked as lively as any hedgehog can hope to look"?
5. Why is the author reassured at the end of the story?

ESSAYS

Choose **ONE** of the following topics and write an essay of at least one and a half pages:

1. Re-tell the story from the hedgehog's point of view.
2. Write about any animal you find interesting.
3. "All I could see were two bright eyes looking out from a ball of fur". Using this as your opening sentence, write a story in any way you choose.