

Game ranching in Kenya

Part 4

*Its coat is the colour of dry grass.
Black spots cover its body.
It has tiny ears and amber eyes.
With long black lines on its face,
it seems to be crying.*

When you look at the cheetah, you cannot deny that the long black lines on its face look like tear marks. But *why* is the cheetah crying ?



Many conservationists will argue that the cheetah is crying because it is an endangered cat. Indeed, there are now less than 12,000 cheetahs living in the wild.

« Are the cheetah's tears a desperate cry for survival ? »

Just read this African folktale about the cheetah and you will know the answer :

A very long time ago, when the earth was first created, all the animals came down onto the savanna.

The cheetah shook his body, stretched his legs and started running. He soon found out that he could run very fast. He ran and ran across the vast plains. After wandering the plains alone, he became lonely and decided to look for friends of his own kind.

He tried to join a pack of lions but they rejected him roaring: *« Well, you are not a lion ! You are much thinner than we are. And look at your feet, you have claws like a dog. Your claws do not retract all the way back into your feet like ours do. You are not a cat, you are a dog ! So, you better run away fast and try to find someone of your own kind. »*

The days went by and the cheetah continued to look for a friend of his own kind. He tried to join a pack of wild dogs but they howled in laughter when they heard his sad story. They barked at him : « *You are not a dog at all ! Look at your round head and ears, and your rough tongue. Your tail is long just like the other cats.* » The pack of wild dogs chased him off, biting at his heels. The poor cheetah raced away.



The cheetah can accelerate up to 71 mph to capture its prey

After running a safe distance from the angry dogs, he came to a camel thorn tree and sat down to rest.

He remembered how the lions had roared and chased him away and how the wild dogs had yelped and bit at his feet. Feeling sad and lonely, he started to cry. He cried and cried.

Hearing his faint cry from a distance, a giraffe walked quietly towards him and asked : « *Why are you crying ?* »

The cheetah looked up tearfully at the giraffe and told her his sad story. Sniffing, he added : « *I've been sitting here crying so long and so hard, look at my beautiful face. The tears have made dark stains down my cheeks.* »

As he was saying so, a bird flew by and chirped : « *I've travelled throughout this land and you, cheetah, are the most splendid and unique of all the cats I've seen.* »



The cheetah has had tearstains ever since that lonely day. And he chirps like a bird to show how proud he is of being the most unique of all cats.

Now YOU know how the cheetah got his tears.

« *When cheetahs are out in the bush, male cheetahs don't like to be friends.* »

Xan should know about it since he grew up with a cheetah at his side. As a toddler, he took his first steps in the savanna holding his mother's hand on one side and Dooms's tail on the other. Dooms is a nickname for a small boy cheetah. The name comes from *Duma*, the Swahili word for cheetah. Dooms and Xan were the best friends in the world. From the time Xan could remember, Dooms was always there, a much-loved member of his family.

This is a true story and it happened on David's game ranch in Kenya.

Separated from his mother, Dooms was only three or four weeks old and unable to feed or care for himself when he came to live with Xan's parents. He was all fur and teeth then and he was scared. Scared of loud noises and other animals, especially human animals like them. He was waiting for his mother to come back from hunting for his food. But she never did.



a cheetah cub

But Dooms never felt lonely when Xan was around. In fact, they became great playmates.

Whenever Dooms went hunting, Xan knew he would come back home from his adventures with a fat stomach and a bloody mouth.

Xan had learnt from his father that his cheetah friend had to go hunting to satisfy his wildest instincts. After all, Dooms was not a pet cat and he should never behave like one. It was a matter of survival. Xan was so proud of his friend's record : he was very fast, the fastest of all the animals.

Cheetahs are fearsome predators. They bring their prey down by tripping or knocking over the animal when it is tired of running. They do not depend on being powerful but on running at full speed. That's why they have a small head to move through the wind easily and strong legs and a long tail for balancing when they are chasing their prey.

Dooms got larger and stronger and when he reached the weight of two hundred pounds, he could just capture any animal he wanted. But his favourites were gazelles and ostriches !

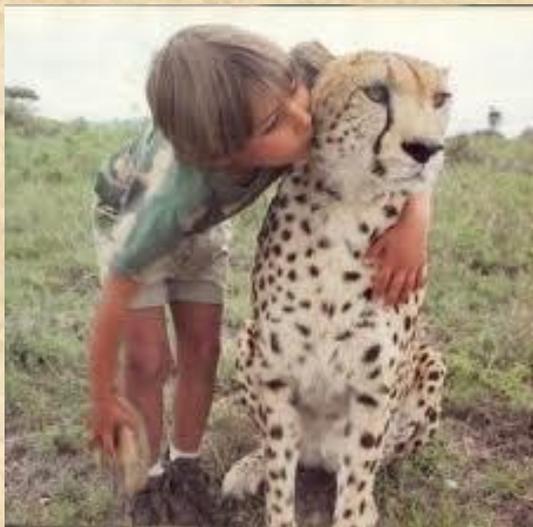


a cheetah about to capture a Grant's gazelle

One day, Dooms went hunting as he would do every two weeks or so. But when he did not come back home that night, Xan started to worry. Three, four, five days passed. Dooms was still missing. Xan's mum and dad drove around the ranch, calling his name. But their voices echoed back and Dooms was nowhere to be seen.

Finally, they drove to their neighbour's ranch and they called Dooms's name once more. When he heard his name, the cheetah walked over and licked David's leg. Xan's parents brought Dooms home and the whole family cried and hugged him.

Xan's mother scolded him though: « *You naughty boy, don't you ever do that again.* »



Xan and Dooms : inseparable friends

From that day on, Xan enjoyed his cheetah friend more and more.

With Dooms he could talk about anything, ask him anything, and he knew the answers. Dooms was a great listener.

« *Dooms was like the kind of friend who just sits and listens to you, all-knowing and sympathetic.* »

Xan knew his cheetah friend was respectful of him and he learnt how to respect him in return. Each time the boy broke the rules, Dooms would just stop playing with him. If he was silly and noisy, his cheetah friend just walked away until he had learned better. Whenever his playmate was disrespectful, mean or evil, Dooms would stare at him with a fierce look in his eyes and growl at him. If the boy continued to act badly, the cheetah would strike him with his big paw. That's how he taught him lessons.

Xan also knew how to make himself forgiven : he would groom or scratch his companion behind the ears or under the chin and Dooms would purr intensely to show his gratitude.



« I was never scared of Dooms, though there were times when he looked at me and seemed to be considering what a tasty little morsel I would make. »

But Xan had yet another lesson to learn from Dooms : the harsh lesson of losing one's best friend. One day, Dooms got sick. He was taken into the hospital in Nairobi for an X-ray to see if something was stuck in his stomach. He was lifted onto the X-ray table and while the hospital workers were putting on their thick black gloves and their aprons...

What happened then ?

Listen to Xan telling the end of the story in his own words : *« You know how it is when you're doing something you think is important and you miss the thing that's really important. And so it was that we missed it when Death came in the door and stole Dooms. »*

That was Xan's first real experience with death.

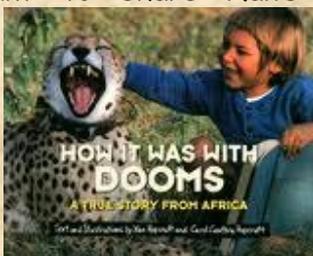
He was only twelve years old when his long-time companion died. The whole family felt a huge sense of loss. To ease their sorrow, Xan's mother suggested they put together a scrapbook of her photos and her son's drawings and tell the story of Dooms. Xan spoke in a tape recorder and his mother typed his recorded words.

Their family story is a living account of how a little boy and his tamed cheetah can learn from each other growing up side by side in the savanna.

When asked what he learnt most from his friendship with Dooms, Xan eagerly answered : *« I learnt about tolerance, flexibility, unfaltering loyalty, keeping calm, exploring all opportunities and not regretting what doesn't work. »*

To be continued ...

If you want to share Xan's story with your students, here is the book reference :



How it Was with Dooms, a true story from Africa by Xan Hopcraft and Carol Cawthra Hopcraft

Xan's text is illustrated with his own drawings and his mother's family photographs.

At level A2