

A close-up photograph of a hedgehog in a natural setting. The hedgehog is the central focus, with its greyish-brown fur and prominent, light-colored quills clearly visible. It is looking directly at the camera with dark, round eyes. The background is a soft-focus forest floor covered in vibrant autumn leaves in shades of red, orange, and brown, interspersed with patches of green moss. The overall lighting is natural, highlighting the texture of the hedgehog's quills and the surrounding foliage.

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By Raymond Howell

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# Section 1

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"**W**hy do you call yourself Bernard De Hedgehog?" A rather pompous visiting Hoopoe once asked Bernard. "Surely De in French means 'of'? So you silly prickly plain thing, how can you possibly be... Bernard of Hedgehog?"

Whereby Neron, The Heron, the lofty counsellor of the wood and friend to many and not wishing to see this visitor tear into the established order of things, stalked uneasily nearby. Where then to the Hoopoe's astonishment the Heron with a loud look at me squawk suddenly lifted his head high and began making circular but anti-clockwise motions in the air with his long strong beak.

The Hoopoe was just about to put the finishing touches to his thesis exploring the premise that all English are simply utterly mad, when the sou dropped. "I get it!" The Hoopoe poo-poo-pooed in cry, "The Hedgehog does not make sense of anything, so that is why it has a poo-poo-poo name?"

With that conundrum suitably settled the wood and to those with even less understanding than this particular hedgehog, such as humans whose minds are just as prickly, the surrounding meadow returned to its seemingly chaotic ordered way of life that was sometimes happy and sometimes sad or occasionally caught in strife...

Where several months later happily free of the dodgy wisdom of Hoopoes and its cock-crest sight, the said Hedgehog's voice was raised with a certain

level of might, but with very little tune, or croon, or the timbre of a bassoon... a rasp in the grasp more like, while being applied maybe, or a poorly bat in a belfry or a fur-ball ejecting cat, whatever it be, he started to sing...

I'm Bernard that's me,  
I don't live in a tree,  
And I ain't a bee,  
I'm a wandering minstrel,  
Happy and free...

Where he paused to check that his audience, Jerome the Mole, was still listening. Which indeed he seemed to be, and so Bernard continued.

With no curtains to hang,  
Or doors to bang,  
I goes where I please,  
Me and me flea...  
But for a worm -  
Or hopefully three,  
I'll stay for a visit,  
And sing ye a song,  
And shake and jit,  
But only for a bit...  
Cos I've places to be,  
I'm Bernard De Hedgehog,  
By name and deed,  
And prickly of back,  
And short in knee,  
I'm Bernard De Hedgehog,  
Yeah, that's me...

“Short in the head more like,” Jerome the mole teased at the end of what was a far too long song for his taste. He much preferred short ones with little wiggles in the middle. Even worse are songs that have no singular purpose other than to please the singer.

“You think it’s a tad long, then?” Bernard wondered when Jerome failed to applaud, as is customary when a minstrel concludes a song.

“Aye it is at that,” Jerome replied mischievously.

Then the mole sagely scratched his conk where a few seconds later he declared in a muffled honking toot. “Yeah..., and now that you’ve mentioned it..., well...” he paused in building hoot, “I reckon you should have stopped after the first line - ‘I’m Bernard that’s me...’ It says all that needs to be said mate. And it don’t need no more, for sure.”

“Oh, really?” Bernard mumbled hurt. He had liked that song, it sort of belonged, he thought.

Not particularly caring about Bernard’s feelings the mole then suggested, “On reflection, you could even do away with the Bernard bit. Cos, we all knows your name.”

Then with a triumphant smile, Mole revealed more of his hurtful reasoning. “And you might as well lose the, ‘That’s me’ bit too... Cos you can’t be anyone else can ya, so its use is redundant... innit?”

“You didn’t like it...” Bernard murmured crest-fallen, while deciding I should have tried it on rabbit...

“Oh, I wouldn’t say that... *exactly*,” came Jerome’s reply, “But please give a heads up next time you’re going to sing it.”

“But me head was up,” Bernard responded somewhat baffled and bemused while feeling slightly used...

“Yes it was...” Jerome agreed to his amuse, “and therein lays the problem, mate.”

With Bernard busily involved trying to solve what he saw as one of Jerome’s clever riddles, the mole exploited the hedgehog’s muddle and disappeared down his hole and was halfway to dinner before Bernard realised he was gone, let alone chance to think of another song.

## Section 2

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"Oh, I do hope Jerome's gone off to let the others know I've composed a new song." Then Bernard preened, "For I never know, I might be asked to give a concert or at the very least offered a long show."

With that, and with no other influence ever to be seen or heard within his immediate and momentary proximity regarding singing, Bernard bowed to an imaginary audience and was just about to give voice to a new song, although he had yet to know how it might start or what it will turn into... when NOTHING came out..., not even a tiny sneeze or a cough or a wormy burp or fummy wheeze.

The day, as it does so often, had quickly flicked a few pages on to select a new second, which somewhere between its beginning and end, somehow managed to get kinked, causing Bernard to be neither here nor there, nor indeed anywhere that he could recognise in the time allotted.

Which in the passing was longer than a human would know, but far less than a fly. But as for a flower? Well, it might well have been an hour. Or for the nearby stand of trees, it was simply another part of a forever, whatever... if I'm left in peace please.

While for Bernard it turned into a moment of enlightenment that almost felt clever, which in the doing would be a hell of an endeavour - for this befuddled Bernard De. Where, as the second finished, he finally came to understand the thrust of Jerome's tease.

Deeply hurt, he turned and snuffled away. Where the last that particular part of the wood on that specific snippet of a never to be repeated day was ever to hear of Bernard was his tear dampened high-pitched off-key carolling,

I ain't staying long,  
I've places to be,  
Cos I'm Bernard De Hedgehog,  
And I'm wild and free,

Then getting into the flow of his new song which was very much like his old one, only better because it was the present one, Bernard's little heart swelled as his voice squeaked tunelessly,

But oh, how I wish I were bee,  
I could fly high above the trees,  
And play loopy-loops in the breeze,  
An eat honey for breakfast dinner and tea,  
An when I licks me toes,  
They'll taste yummy to me... see,

Then more sadly he decided.

But I can't...,  
Cos I'm just... old little me,  
With friends who are horrible,  
And nas\_ty...  
Who makes me as sad,  
As sad can ever be,  
Yeah, I'm Bernard De Hedgehog,  
With me cacti back,  
An hairy knees,  
Free to be wherever I please,

Yeah anywhere...,  
'Cept' for this blimming lea.

So lost in remorse and sadness was he, that crossing the lane into his new free, he failed to see, or hear, or even note, that thing with a back-end that smokes, and chokes, and in smote, ruthlessly evokes the last note from a careless voice.

But owl noticed, as he sat in his tree, where down he swooped, and in mid stoop, he opened claws and lifted Bernard high above the floor, and on up over canopies, where they lopyy-looped to Bernard's please, before landing just like bee, onto a patch of grass, that came up to Bernard's shaky but happy and astonished... *knees*.

Then with a bow Owl took his leave, but not without flinging back, "Sing all you like my friend, and don't listen to mole, he's nowt but jealous of ye, cos all he does is dig holes and pee... So, be off with you Bernard De, and be happy and free, and next time you're passing by do bring a song for me... cos it's lonely up in me tree.

## Section 3

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Where owl then in silent lonely hoot, perched and mused yes, I to wonder what it's like to be a bee?

Whereas, a flitting bee wondered, what if I were a flea?

While a flea between bites wittered, what if I were a gnat?

And a dog straining on a leash, growled testily, what if I were a cat?

While a cat meowed smugly, and what if I were a squirrel?

Where not one ever imagined - what if I were a human?

Because that particular basin is not one that any of those animals or little critters and creatures would ever care to bathe in or sup from.

Not even Bernard, snuffling along through layers of leaves so kindly spread about by the trees, in winter loss to his gain, as he set about composing yet another little song, but not about rain, but tunnels short and long.

Tunnels go down,  
And have two ends,  
And in the middle,  
They twist and bend,  
Some lead down into moles,

While others end up in -  
Fur-lined holes,  
Or into nests of mice and voles.

Then with a little throaty, I like that chuckle, he lifted his snout in a song-filled shout,

And not one has any lights in,  
Or tables or central 'heatin',  
But all are welcoming,  
Places for sleeping,  
For breeding,  
Feeding,  
And occasionally bleeding,  
All are homes,  
Which call in greeting,  
Except to humans...  
Who would see them depleting,  
Of all living things...  
An fill em instead with plastics,  
They are so freely tossing...

You're not so silly really, are you Bernard, the owl thought admiringly while hooting sincerely and loudly... "Not Twit you... Not Twit You... Not Twit You, At All..."

Where Bernard snuffled back, "Until next time my friend. Until next time... And I promise to find you your very own rhyme. Goodbye, owl, good friend of mine. Goodbye."

Whereas this time, he did see that thing which smokes.

And as he choked in its passing he began to wonder...

But then he didn't.

With snout raised he snuffled the air in a who cares about humans way, only to wander into a wire trap. Set by a greedy wicked farmer to zap, rodents who might, just might, lap on pheasant's eggs, or in stealth kidnap the chicks, or just generally cause havoc for the utter sheer kicks.

So it would seem, as Bernard peered forlornly up and down the long row of cages with magpies, stoats, weasels and even a rat entrapped, we may well have come to the very end of all this and that...

So, goodbye all. And sleep tight... That is... if conscience might allow a night, to pass without uneasy stir or blurry sight. For some it will, and others it might, but not poor Bernard or those other prisoners in awaited plight. Oh No, not for those poor poor mites.

Good Night...