



UP CLOSE AND PERSONAL: AN ANTELOPE'S STORY

Excitement waxed high as caretakers at the Out of Africa Wildlife Park waited eagerly for Swazi, an African sable antelope, to give birth. But there was a risk. Pilgrim, a friendly, ten-year-old giraffe who has a habit of standing just inches from young antelope, picking them up by the ears, then dropping them to the ground, loomed nearby. No harm would be intended, but sixteen feet is a long way to fall. The plan was to separate Swazi prior to birthing. But the movement came, and Swazi delivered a thirty-five pound male baby named Kianga.

Kianga was mahogany brown with giant marble sized, black pearl eyes, sheltered with lashes to die for. Swazi stood comfortingly above the vulnerable leg-folded body, anticipating him to stand within an hour. But he didn't. After a while, caregivers expertly gathered him up with mom's permission, placing him in a secured area. Mom followed.

Hours passed, but still he didn't stand. Swazi knew that if her baby couldn't stand, he couldn't nurse. If he couldn't nurse, he wouldn't survive. In her natural world, she knew that lions or hyenas would soon be coming. She shouldn't wait too long.

At about the fourth hour, the veterinarian intervened, again with mom's permission. He held Kianga in a prone position with help from two attendants, inserted a rubber tube into the mouth, down the throat, and into the stomach. Next came the goat milk replacement formula. He pulled out the soft, clear tube, gathered up his equipment and assistants and left the scene, as if no one had been there. Then Swazi returned.

Hours passed. Still Kianga couldn't stand, though he struggled gallantly, many times. But then night came, and Swazi left. She knew something was wrong with her calf. He was now just a meal for the nearest predator.

But caretakers surrounded him all night, bottle feeding him every two hours. Then it happened. He stood. By morning he was standing on his own. Swazi was called back to her forsaken offspring, but she refused him. Other members of the herd were summoned, but little Kianga was unacceptable to them. He was now ours to feed, to raise, to keep him warm at night, and to teach him to be a sable antelope, not a hybrid lost somewhere between human and animal.

At night he stayed inside; during the day he hid under trees and bushes in an area adjacent to his natural family, who never visited him. But that was okay with him. He didn't need them; he had us, his human family, who attended to his every need.

At two months, we offered his original family a chance to take him back, to raise him as a herd member. We would feed him, but they would teach him the sable way. To our surprise and joy, they accepted him. But two zebra bolted in to kill him. This territory was theirs, and he was too young to defend himself. His family fiercely protected him, but the zebra were relentless. Leaving him alone with his original family would most likely mean death to the tender youngster at some unguarded moment. And, of course, Pilgrim, the sable-loving giraffe, would be after him relentlessly. So we reluctantly decided to withdraw the offer.

Fortunately, another sable herd, run by a powerful, yet gentle experienced male, could be, (if they decided) his surrogate family. So we isolated a young "nanny" female, who was caring for a younger male, then we introduced Kianga. We hoped to give them the opportunity to use their natural instincts to nurture, and to play with another just like themselves. Within two weeks, they showed interest as expected. Then we introduced Kianga to Zambesi and his first "wife" Savuti. Within two weeks, they accepted him, but he hadn't accepted them! He loved us because we fed him four times a day. To him they were just creatures to watch, not to interact with, and to form relationship ties.

But after about six weeks, he began to sit next to the herd. Two weeks later we let the entire herd out with the other animals—giraffe, zebra, ostrich and other antelope. It didn't take long before Kianga got lost, despite Etoshia, the "nanny's" best herding and calling efforts. So we put them all back where they had just been, letting each of them out occasionally. One month later, we opened the gates again. This time Kianga, about four months old, remained with the herd. In fact, all the other animals, even a herd of zebra, opened themselves to him. He walked freely among them without concern, a new yet respectable member of the animal kingdom.

Though his beginnings were doubtful, and his initial raising uncertain, Kianga's future spans in front of him like the Serengeti itself. He can now take his place on this planet with other sable, the ones who kill lions.

Long live Kianga.