

HOW TO STUFF A RHINO

By Gene Twaronite

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For as long as Juan could remember, he had always wanted a rhinoceros. But even though today was his birthday, he never really expected that his wish might come true.

But there, sticking out from under the bed, was a rhino's head. It wiggled its ears as Juan closed the door behind him.

The full-grown black rhino snorted, then tipped his two great horns as he stood up, nearly smashing the bed into the ceiling. Around his neck was tied a big red birthday ribbon.

Juan blinked his eyes, and then he began to laugh and cry at the same time. For the next hour, he and the rhino played all kinds of games, including hide-and-seek and rhino tag, which is much rougher than people tag.

Suddenly, the rhino stopped playing and stepped to the window. Putting his post-like front feet on the windowsill, he seemed to squint at something far away. A big tear ran down his snout.

"What's the matter? Are you hungry?" Juan pulled out his last candy bar and held it out for the rhino. But the rhino just turned his head away and stared sadly through the window.

"Maybe you're thirsty," Juan said. He opened a can of soda and offered it to the rhino. But, again, the rhino just turned his head, looking ever sadder as he continued staring at the horizon.

"Maybe you're just homesick. Is that what's wrong?"

The rhino nodded his head.

"Then I guess we'll have to get you back home," Juan said, with a tear in his own eye. For deep down inside, he knew that a black rhino's real home was Africa, not under a bed. So he took out an atlas and, turning to the page for Africa, began to name places from the map.

"Egypt?" The rhino shook his head.

"The Sahara Desert?" Again, the rhino shook his head.

"What about this place—the S-e-r-e-n-g-e-t-i?" This time, the rhino nodded and wiggled his ears.

"That's it!" Juan shouted. "But before we go, I must find a box to hide you in. I know they won't allow a rhinoceros on the bus."

So Juan took down a box from his closet and pointed for the rhino to climb in. But though they both pushed and squeezed as hard as they could, it was just a bit too small to stuff a rhino inside.

Juan ran to his parents' bedroom and brought back the round, wide hatbox in which his mother stored her Easter bonnet. Again, they both pushed and squeezed. "Breathe out," Juan shouted, "and try to bend your horns a little!" And this time, though still a tight fit, the rhino just made it all the way into the box. After punching a few air holes in the lid, Juan pressed it down firmly. Then he broke open his piggy bank for some travel money—four dollars and forty-four cents—and, with all his might, lifted the hatbox and tiptoed downstairs and out the front door. He didn't want his parents to know that he was going to Africa to return their birthday present.

Juan walked as fast as he was able—as fast as anyone could carrying a full-grown black rhino in a hatbox—down the street to the bus station. It was now two o'clock and he didn't want to be late for supper.

"One round-trip ticket to the Serengeti, please," he said to the ticket agent.

"I'm sorry," the ticket agent said, "but the bus only goes as far as Port City. From there you'll have to catch a cargo ship for Africa."

So Juan bought a round-trip ticket to Port City. But just as he was boarding the bus, the driver stopped him. "What have you got in the box?" he asked.

"Just a hat, sir," said Juan, shaking.

"If it's just a hat, then why does the box need air holes?" the bus driver asked, stroking his chin.

Juan was stumped. He hemmed and he hawed, then decided to simply tell the truth. "It's just a rhino, sir—a black rhino I'm returning to the Serengeti today."

"Sure," said the driver, laughing and shaking his head, "and I bet you've got an elephant in there, too!"

As Juan took his seat, there came a loud snort from the hatbox. The rhino *bated* elephants.

In a short time, the bus arrived at Port City. Juan climbed off the bus and trudged down the street to the port. The hatbox seemed to be getting heavier and heavier.

As luck would have it, there was an express cargo ship leaving for Africa that very moment. Quickly, Juan bought a round-trip ticket. Then, clutching his precious cargo, he ran down to the gangplank.

But as he tried to board the ship, he was stopped by the grey-bearded captain. "What have you got in the box, mate?" he asked.

"Just a rhino, sir—a black rhino I'm returning to the Serengeti today."

"I don't believe you," the captain said in a stern voice. "You better let me have a look inside."

There was nothing Juan could do except to obey the captain's orders. He opened the hatbox and out popped the rhino's head with his two great horns. The rhino snorted indignantly.

"Yup, that's a rhino all right," the captain said. "Well then, we'd better be off, for you've still got a long way to go."

In a surprisingly short time, the cargo ship arrived at Luanda, on the west coast of Africa. Just as Juan was about to get off, however, the captain came over and pulled him to one side.

"Now here's how you must go," he said. "Take the express train to Nairobi. Then catch a bush plane to the Serengeti. With any luck, you should be there by three-thirty."

Juan thanked the captain, then ran down the gangplank and around the corner to the train station, where he hurriedly bought a round-trip ticket and hopped on the train just as it was leaving.

And as the train chugga-chug-chugged east from Luanda to Kananga and north through Uganda, Juan and the rhino both fell fast asleep.

When they awoke, the train was just pulling into Nairobi. From the hatbox there came a deep sigh, for the rhino was feeling very cramped inside.

"Just a little longer," Juan said. Then he grabbed the hatbox and headed off for the airport where, as luck would have it, a bush pilot was just getting ready to take off in his two-seater plane for the Serengeti.

"Can you take me with you?" Juan asked.

"Well, I don't know," the pilot said, scratching his head. "What have you got in the box?"

"Just a rhino," Juan said, "a black rhino I'm returning to the Serengeti today. And I must hurry! Please help me."

"You don't say," the pilot said. "Well, it just so happens that I'm headed to the perfect place for rhinos. Hop aboard."

Juan offered the pilot his last bit of money, but the pilot shook his head. "This flight is on me," he said. "Your rhino needs all the help he can get."

From Nairobi, they flew southwest to the Serengeti. To the east, the gleaming whiteness of Mount Kilimanjaro filled the window. And to the west, the great broad plains of the Serengeti began to spread out before them. Juan took the lid off the hatbox so the rhino could see all the animals below—vast herds of wildebeest, zebras, giraffes, and... even one elephant. The rhino snorted.

They landed near a water hole filled with plenty of mud, next to a small grove of acacia tree. "Didn't I tell you I knew the perfect place?" the pilot said.

"Well, here you are," Juan said to the rhino. "Home at last." But just as he opened the hatbox, Juan noticed a jeep, with black-and-white stripes, parked behind a big acacia tree. Two scruffy men with stubby faces and crumpled hats sat inside staring at the water hole.

“That’s what I was afraid of,” the pilot said. “Poachers. They’ll kill your rhino for sure, just to sell his horns.”

“But I can’t bring him back now,” Juan said. “Yet if what you say is true, I can’t leave him here!”

“Well, there is one thing we could do,” the pilot said. “We could give your rhino a disguise.”

But finding a disguise for a full-grown black rhino is not as easy as it sounds. Juan and the pilot sat, and they thought, and then sat and thought some more. For just how do you disguise a rhino?

Then Juan had an idea. “We’ll need a paintbrush, some aluminum foil, and a can of paint,” he said. And the pilot just happened to have those things onboard the plane.

When Juan finished with the rhino, he gave him one last hug, and then he and the pilot boarded the plane. As they took off for Nairobi, Juan held his breath and watched below ... as the rhino trotted straight past the poachers and on across the plains. Of course, the two poachers did not follow, for anyone knows, only a fake rhino would have aluminum foil horns, a paintbrush tail, and the word “RHINO” painted on both sides.

The plane landed in Nairobi, just in time for Juan to quickly thank the pilot and just catch the last express train, which took him back through Uganda, west to Kananga and Luanda, where he caught the last express cargo ship just leaving for Port City.

Still clutching the hatbox, which was much lighter now, Juan ran all the way from the Port City bus station to his house. It was just six o’clock as he opened the door, where his father was waiting.

“We were getting worried,” Juan’s father said. “Where have you been and what have you got in Mother’s hatbox?”

Juan opened the box and began to cry. “I’m sorry,” he said, “but I had to return your gift.” Then, as they sat down to supper, Juan told his parents all about his trip to Africa that day. But much to his surprise, his parents were not at all angry.

And as Juan blew out the candles on his birthday cake, he made a wish that his real live “fake” rhino would always be safe on the Serengeti.