



Neria

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Neria

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The five boys (aged 8-9) who helped write this book are members of the Walden Countryside Wild Child Club.

All royalties from this book will help fund the Club.

Search: Walden Countryside Wild Child

www.walden-countryside.co.uk

First published 2021

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ISBN 978-19164631-3-4

Foreword (for Mums & Dads)

This story has been created by and for a “Wild Child” group of home-educated youngsters who, during the lockdown period of the Covid 19 pandemic when restrictions kept everyone at home, met only by Zoom. Each week we read a new chapter, talked about it and suggested what might happen in next week’s session. When we started no one knew how the story would end and, as you will find, we are still not certain.

The story line concerns a boy from our own (locked down) time and a girl from the Stone Age. They explore each other’s worlds. To the girl, our world is full of magic and magicians who can light matches, switch on electric lights and tame wild animals. To the boy, the Stone Age is an exciting but strange place where he finds the girl knows much more about nature and how to survive than he does.

I hope the fairly short chapters will make it suitable as a book to read to children or for those who have recently learnt to read.

The book is intended to do a little teaching, within a story that I hope children will enjoy. The Wild Child group certainly enjoyed helping to create it.

The little “Things to think about” sections at the end of each chapter are optional – but again the Wild Child Club members enjoyed discussing some of these points.

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Chapter 1

The Hot Springs

I live miles from anywhere, at the end of a long forest track leading to the valley where our farm is. It takes nearly an hour to get from my home to school but now the schools are all closed for the summer and I only see my school friends on Zoom. The rest of the time I'm a farmer. Dad says that in the olden days someone who was ten would be out working on the farm all day and I had better get used to living in the olden days now I'm not at school.

Most days my work is just to climb up the path towards the mountains and check that all our sheep are OK and still in the fields where they are supposed to be. There's never been any problem with the sheep and so I have plenty of time to enjoy myself alone in the hills and what I enjoy most is swimming in the hot springs.

There's a little stream that runs down the valley from our sheep fields and even in winter the water is quite warm near where it bubbles up at the base of a cliff. It runs into a big pond before starting off down our stream on its way to the river. The pond is like an outdoor warm swimming pool and we try to keep it a secret, so that lots of tourists don't find it. But now there aren't any tourists anyway.

Today, like most days when I have finished checking the sheep, I took off my clothes and had a lovely swim. Then I lay in the sun to get dry.

Suddenly, before I was ready to get dressed again, a girl appeared from behind a bush: she must have

been hiding in the entrance of the cave that is just next to where the hot spring bubbles up. She had undressed too, so I expected she wanted to swim too. She looked at me, smiled, and said something but I couldn't understand a word of what she said.

I can only speak French but the people on the other side of the mountain speak Spanish. I can't speak Spanish but I know what it sounds like and some words sound the same as French. It wasn't Spanish she was speaking. Mum and Dad had told me that, further along the mountains, towards the Atlantic Ocean, people speak a language called Basque that is different from all other languages. Maybe she was speaking Basque.

Even though neither of us could understand the other, we started to try. She pointed to herself and said "Neria" and then pointed at me. I pointed at myself and said "Édouard". So then we knew each other's names. Then it turned into a game - we took turns to point at a bit of each other and saying the name, which the other would then say in their own language. I soon knew the words for head, nose, ears, arm, leg, foot, willy, belly button and quite a lot more.

Then we had a swim. "Swimming" I said and Neria's reply taught me another word. Next we started doing things we could describe: stand-up, sit-down, run, walk and so on.

When it was nearly tea-time, and I needed to go home, we had just started to be able to understand each other's language a bit. She signalled by putting

her head on one side, resting it on her hands and closing her eyes. Either she was tired or she was saying she wanted to go home or maybe she was asking where I would go to sleep. I pointed to my house way off down the valley and signed that I eat my food and sleep there. She pointed into the cave and made the same signs.

I got my clothes and started to get dressed. Neria went into the cave and came out again with her clothes. They were really weird: some pants and a vest made of fur and, on top, some floppy trousers and a kind of pull-over jerkin with an animal design on the front, both made with animal skins that were still a bit hairy. Her boots were made from thicker leather without fur. I thought her clothes were rather ugly.

Neria was making a last attempt at language learning – she pointed at the sun and I told her its name. Then she said “sun” in her language and pointed to show it going right across the sky to set in the west, then rising again in the east. I made the sun-setting sign. Then the going-to-sleep sign. Then the sun-rising sign. Then pointed at her and me.

I said “Neria and Édouard?” and she said the same and disappeared into her cave.

I think she means we can meet tomorrow. I'm already looking forward to seeing her again but I don't think I'll tell Mum and Dad about her yet. They would only think I was making up stories.

Things to think about

- Do you think Édouard is imagining Neria or is she real?
- If she is real, where might she live?
- Why does she wear funny clothes?
- If you met someone who couldn't speak your language, how could you learn to talk with them?
- What will Édouard and Neria do tomorrow?

Chapter 2 Cow's Milk and Reindeer meat

The next day Dad asked me to help with the cows in the morning. At that time the cows that we milked each day shared a field with those that had stopped giving milk and with the heifers that were too young to have calves yet. We needed to separate them so the bull could be put with the cows that had stopped giving milk and the heifers needed to stay out of the bull's way until they were old enough to get pregnant.

It didn't take long to finish the task and Dad asked if I'd walk the three heifers up to the sheep fields and let them live with the sheep for the rest of the summer.

"You can take some food with you and have a swim afterwards" he added.

I took my lunch sandwiches and headed for the hills. It's not difficult walking heifers - you put a rope round the neck of the friendliest one and lead it like a dog, the other two just follow.

There was no problem with the sheep and they seemed quite happy to share their field with the young cows. It was time for a swim and, I hoped, to meet Neria.

She stepped out from the entrance to the cave just as I arrived. I think she must have been watching me for some time. She seemed fascinated by the sheep and the cows and obviously had loads of questions she wanted to ask but she didn't know enough French.

I'd brought my lunch-time cheese sandwiches with me, so when she got out a little leather bag with some food in it we sat beside each other for a picnic. I looked at what she was eating: some cooked meat and a kind of vegetable paste with green leaves and stems mixed with stuff that looked like brown mashed potato. I wanted to know what it was and pointed at it and tried to ask. She thought I wanted to try it and gave me some meat and vegetable mix. It really tasted very good so I offered her some of my bread and cheese sandwiches and a bite of my apple. She obviously thought I had good food too - but what was hers?

I pointed at her meat and then at the cows and said "moo" and she said no. So I pointed at the sheep and said "baa" and she said no again. Then she got down on hands and knees, pretending to be an animal, then used her hands spread out and held up beside her ears. She was being a deer with antlers. So that was what the meat was. So I taught her the word for a roe deer in French (that's the smallest of our deer) and she told me what deer were called in her language: it sounded like "elur-oreinak". I wondered what sort it was and used signs to ask if it was a big or small deer. She signed back and said it was really big - then she did some more signing. She pretended to be a mother holding a baby so it could drink its mother's milk. Then she did the antler signs again. At last I realised what she meant: the mother deer had antlers like the male ones. So elur-oreinak must be reindeer because it's only reindeer where the females have antlers. Where do

reindeer live around here? I'd never seen one, not even on Christmas Eve.

I wanted to know what her vegetables were but it was her turn to ask the questions. What was my cheese? I tried to say it was made from cow's milk: I pointed at the cows and told her how to say cow. Then I pointed at their udders and mimed milking a cow. She looked puzzled for a bit, then she realised and pointed at her own chest and pretended to let a baby suckle again. She said her word for milk and I said yes.

Explaining about bread was even more difficult than cheese: there weren't any fields of wheat this high up, so I picked some grass with seed heads and signed how you could get seeds from big grasses and grind them up and then mix them with water and cook them to make bread.

It was easier for her to tell me about her vegetables. She picked some young stinging nettles then she pulled up some plants with feathery leaves whose roots looked like brownish, thin carrots. So her lunch was boiled nettles and mashed up wild carrots. It tasted jolly good. Why can't you buy tins of reindeer, nettle and wild carrot in the supermarket?

I tried to ask her where reindeer lived round here. and she took me into the cave . There, right at the back, where there was just enough light to see it, was a painting of a reindeer. I couldn't understand what Neria was saying about it though.

It was time to go home but we both made it clear we would meet again tomorrow. This time it wasn't

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all signs. We knew how to say something like “see you tomorrow” and she kissed me goodbye.

I’m looking forward to tomorrow.

Things to think about

- What was your last meal? What was in it? What was it when it was still a living plant or animal?
- Where do people who still eat reindeer live?
- What might Neria bring to eat tomorrow?

Chapter 3

A Mammoth Feast?

Dad had no work for me next morning so I asked to go up to the sheep with my lunch and stay there afterwards to see if I could spot any eagles or vultures. I didn't say anything about Neria – she was my special secret. I was certain she'd be there again today and she was.

We were going to have lunch together and learn some more words. My sandwiches had sardines in them and she saw they were fish straight away. I didn't know if her word meant any sort of "fish" or only "sardine".

She had meat again but it was different from yesterday's reindeer – for a start it was still raw. It was a big lump of meat dripping with red blood. Surely she wasn't going to eat it raw? No, she was going to cook us both a meal and she started gathering sticks and arranging them on top of some dry grass that should be easy to light. Neria went back into the cave and carried out a big stick that had been alight and was still glowing at one end. She blew on it, trying to get it properly alight so she could start the fire. It went out and she said a short word very loudly. I didn't need to ask her what the word meant. Fortunately, I had a box of matches in my pocket so I got one out, struck it and lit the fire. She looked absolutely amazed and kept saying "Magia".

When the fire was going properly we picked a bunch of nice young nettles and stuffed them into holes she made in the lump of meat. Then she

covered the meat up with ashes at the bottom of the fire. While the meat cooked we had plenty of time to ask each other questions. I asked her what "magia" meant and she said she would show me. She collected five little round pebbles and gripped them in one hand. Then she threw them, all at the same time, and caught them in the other hand. Then she opened one hand and showed it was empty and so was the other when she opened that. She reached across and retrieved one of the pebbles from behind my ear and did the same four more times until she had all five pebbles in her hand. Then she threw them away. So she thought striking a match was a conjuring trick and I suddenly realised that we had found a word that was nearly the same in French and in Neria's language. "Magia" is the same as "Magie".

I got my match box out again and got a match out slowly and showed her which end was going to catch fire. Then I struck it and she squeaked with surprise and seemed to have no idea how I had done my magic trick. But then I didn't know how she had done hers.

I thought I'd show her some real magic: I got out my phone and took a picture of her. I showed her the picture and she was absolutely amazed. So I showed her which buttons to press and she took a picture of me.

I pointed at the cooking meat and said "deer?" She said no and signed to say it was a really big animal and then leaned forward and held one arm so it looked as though it were attached to her

head and waved it to and fro like the trunk of an elephant at the zoo. Then she made a trumpeting sound just like an elephant. Her name for the animal was “mamutxoá” – quite like those elephants we call “mammouts” in French. She was saying she was cooking me a chunk of mammoth meat. But mammoths have been extinct for thousands of years. She might be good at magic tricks but not that good.

I asked her where the mammoths lived and she said she would show me when I could speak her language a bit better.

She added “You can get there on a path through the cave”.

It was a really good meal and afterwards we had a swim and washed all the mammoth grease off our hands and faces. When we were dry and dressed she kissed me goodbye and said:

“See you tomorrow” and I replied:

“And some mammoths soon I hope” just as she disappeared.

When I got home it was only an hour to our evening meal. I wasn’t very hungry and sat thinking about Neria and what might happen tomorrow.

Mum said “What’s wrong Édouard? You haven’t eaten much and you look as though you are worried about something.”

I replied “No I’m fine Mum, it’s just that I’m not feeling very hungry. I had a mammoth meal at lunch time.”

Things to think about

- When did mammoths live in our world?
- How do matches work?
- What ways might Neria's family be able to start fires without matches?
- What other animals might live in Neria's world?

Chapter 4

The Mammoth Hunt

I was determined to learn Neria's language and get taken to see the mammoths and she was just as keen to learn French from me. We met every day for a fortnight and practised very hard. She was really good at knowing the names of all the plants and animals that we saw. Often I didn't know a plant's name in French so I just used her word for it.

Everyday Neria was waiting for me near the hot spring. She was never late and, one day, I asked her how long she had to wait.

"It used to be a whole day" she replied and then explained why.

"When I go home it is always exactly the same time as when I left - so no one ever notices that I've been missing. The only problem is, if I've spent a long time with you, I'm quite tired when I get home and there's still loads of work waiting to be done. So I usually have a sleep in the cave before I go home.

The real problem is that the same thing happens when I come through the cave to you: it is the same time here as when I had left you and I have to wait right through the night before you come back. If I have a good long sleep in the entrance to cave then it is early morning when I get here I only have a few hours to wait for you."

In one way this was really good news: if the cave worked the same way for me, I would be able to go and see the mammoths in Neria's world and then get home without anyone knowing I'd been away.

At last she said we were ready for a visit to her world.

“Come early tomorrow.”

Before I went to bed that night I Googled “Mammoth” and learned quite a lot about them. They are certainly extinct, and I hope Neria isn’t just joking. Well, it will be fun to find out tomorrow.

Neria was waiting for me at the hot spring all fully dressed in her rather ugly leather clothes. She had another set of clothes with her and said I should leave all my clothes at the cave entrance and put on her spare set, so I would look like someone from where she lived. She said her people wouldn’t believe her if she said I came from a world where animals were tame and I could make fire with little magic sticks.

When she had shown me how everything fitted, and had helped me lace-up my boots, she led me into the cave. She had a smouldering stick that she blew on and got it burning properly at one end, where a lump of fat was tied on.

She held the other end of the torch aloft, so we could see where we were going. I’d explored the cave before but never found the tiny little tunnel whose entrance was hidden behind a rock. At first the tunnel was dark but then I saw daylight a long way in front of us. When we stepped out of the tunnel we were in a different world: Neria’s world.

Neria signalled me to follow her: “We don’t want to be seen by everyone and get told to do some work.”

Nearly everywhere was open grassy countryside with just scattered trees and bushes. The really exciting things were the animals: there were lots of wild horses and bison (I'd only ever seen bison in the zoo or on television before). What I could see seemed a bit like the television films of Africa except the herds of African zebra were horses and the wildebeest were bison. And it was really quite cold, not hot like everyone says Africa is.

Neria pointed into the distance and said:

"There's usually some mammoths in the long reeds down by that big river" and we set off across the grassy plain to find them.

The horses and bison ran away whenever we got anywhere near them.

When we got near the river we could see wide paths going into the reed beds and we could hear the mammoths trumpeting sometimes. We crept along one of the paths until we could see four mammoths pulling up great bunches of reeds with their trunks. One of them was a baby.

Neria whispered "We'd better go back before they see us. Mother mammoths get really fierce if they think you might hurt their baby".

When we were a safe distance away, we sat down on some rocks where we could watch the horses and bison and eat the lunch Neria had brought. It was pieces of cooked meat that we ate with lots of the bilberries that were growing all round us. There weren't any springs or streams near us but Neria had a leather bag with her that was full of water so we shared that.

Then I needed a wee, I found a bush but I couldn't find the right opening in my leather trousers. I think they were made for a girl and I had to lower them like girls do.

I tried to work out where we were: unless going through the cave had taken us to a completely different world it must have taken us back in time to when mammoths were still around and people lived in caves. The sun and all the animals and plants, and Neria of course, all looked like things we knew in my world so I decided it was our world but we must have gone back in time. How long ago was that?

I couldn't think of the words to ask Neria what the date was. It wouldn't have made any sense to her anyway: we say the date is how many years since Jesus was born. Well he hadn't been born when there were mammoths and it seemed unlikely Neria would know how long she would have to wait for the first Christmas.

We started walking back to the cave and on the way we met a couple of grown-ups. The man carried a spear and the woman a dead mountain hare. Neria obviously knew them and I heard her say my name so she must be telling them where I came from. When they were gone I asked if she had told them about my world.

"No, they wouldn't have believed me, so I said you were a dream-time friend."

I was puzzled:

“Can other people see your dream-time friends?”

“Of course they can, at least sometimes, just like people can sometimes see the dryads that live inside the trees or the spirits of the animals.”

Well, everything was different in her world so I suppose it makes sense here.

It had been hours since we first arrived in mammoth country and there was a long part of the path left to reach the cave and my home. I found the right words to tell Neria I had to go home because it was late.

She said “I’ve explained that lots of times – when I get home from visiting your world, it is exactly the same time I left.”

She was certain it would work the same way for me and that I would find it just the same time when I got home as when I left.

I didn’t quite believe her but she said it always worked that way for her when she visited my world.

“Anyway I’ll come with you and you can show me something of your world. But we shouldn’t go yet: it will be early morning in your world and it is evening here. We should sleep here and then go to your world”

So we made a bed of dry grass in the entrance to the cave and curled up together until morning.

She said I could keep my leather clothes and hide them in the cave where my own clothes were. We went through the cave and it was morning in my world too.

I put my own clothes back on then I realised we had plenty of time for a swim before I went home so I started to take my clothes off again.

As I was getting ready for our swim I thought about Neria's world. If I had stayed there for ten years would it have still been today when I got home? And would I still be ten, or twenty? Would I like living in Neria's world?

But the real problem was how can I show her my world? What will Mum and Dad say?

Things to think about

- Where did the very first humans live? Was it like Neria's country?
- Fairies are sort of "dream-time friends" that we only have in stories now. Once people really believed they could see them. What other sorts of imaginary beings did people once think were real?
- Édouard wondered what would happen if he stayed ten years in Neria's world then got back to his world. Would he be a ten-year-old boy again or a young man of twenty? What do you think?
- If Édouard takes Neria to meet his Mum and Dad, what will they believe about where she comes from?