



Matthäus Bär

Three Capybaras On the Run

Original title: Drei Wasserschweine brennen durch
March 2024
144 pages
With illustrations by Anika Voigt
Age 6 and up

Meet our new heros – the Capybaras

Emmy, Tristan and Raul are three little capybaras. They are good friends and live together with their flock in a meadow at the zoo. The three friends wonder if there is more outside their enclosure than they are able to see – what might lie beyond the fence? With courage, skill and a little luck, they manage to escape through the fence and explore the world around them. On their nightly excursions, they get to know the neighbouring animals and experience exciting and fun adventures.

- Unusual protagonists and a popular zoo setting
- A humorous book for the whole family to read aloud, featuring lovable capybaras
- The animals' nighttime adventures make perfect bedtime stories



© Stefan Vucina

Matthäus Bär, is one of Austria's best-known children's songwriters, inspiring children with his clever lyrics and beautiful music. He won the DIXI Children's Literature Prize – an award for new talents and unpublished texts – in 2019 for his manuscript of 'The Three Capybaras Make a Getaway'.

Anika Voigt, is an illustrator and architect. She mainly draws for children: children's books, exercise books, funny characters. Occasionally she writes the stories for them, too. She also works as an architect and illustrates architectural motifs. She lives in Cologne with her family.

Sample Translation
By Rebecca Heier

Chapter 1

The Capybaras and the More

“This can’t be all there is,” huffed Raul. “There’s just got to be more.”

He stamped angrily on the hard, packed-down ground.

“Lying around in the mud, waiting to be fed, eating, resting, bathing, farting in the pond, sleeping, looking for leftover feed, lazing around, eating some more, and then sleeping again. There’s gotta be more to life!”

The other capybaras looked at him blankly.

Emmy swam a few strokes and sheepishly released a few bubbles that rose up and broke on the water’s surface.

“Day after day, the same old routine! Waiting to be fed and then snoozing! Haven’t any of you ever asked yourselves if there maybe isn’t something more than that?” snarled Raul, splashing into the water beside Emmy.

“Well, now and then we do tease the emus,” said Tristan softly, but Raul wasn’t even listening to him.

He was gazing down to the other end of the enclosure, to the anteaters, to the fence, to the people behind it, and beyond. Sometimes Raul seemed to be off in a different world with his thoughts. The rest of the capybaras had difficulty even imagining anything beyond the day’s second feeding, or how the pond water would feel the next morning. They didn’t understand how Raul could be curious about things that none of them had ever seen or experienced. Because of that, they had a certain respect for him, but were a little freaked out, too.

Capybaras are not curious by nature. Unknown and surprising things leave them cold. Not for nothing is “Curiosity killed the capybara” their most important proverb. So they got out of the water, gaped at Raul in confusion, and went to rest, cuddled up, under the big tree.

After their first afternoon nap, the capybaras wandered around looking for leftover tidbits. Only Raul stood off to the side, staring at the barrier surrounding their enclosure. Then someone nudged him.

“Do you really think there’s something behind there?” asked Emmy, rolling him a nibbled-on apple. Raul bit into it with a crunch.

“Of course there is! Where do they come from? They can’t just pop up out of nowhere.”

Emmy followed Raul’s gaze and noticed the two-legged creatures behind the fence, who were looking back at them and pointing their fleshy fingers.

“I’ve never thought about it.” She quickly turned around. Thoughts of humans and whatever might be behind the fence made her uneasy.

From the pond in front of them rose bubbles, and Tristan surfaced out of the murky water. A piece of reed grass hung from his mouth.

“And you think,” he spluttered, “that there’s more behind the fence? More of what, anyway?”

All three of them turned once again to the humans. Before Raul could answer, they watched as one of the red-cheeked, two-legged beings reached into the big bag with two straps that he wore on his back. From it he pulled a small packet wrapped in paper. Paper, the capybaras knew, was a wonderful thing. One time, the keeper had lost a slip of notepaper on the meadow, and they’d had a great time playing with it the whole afternoon.

But that you could hide things in paper, that was new to them. The human behind the fence unfolded the paper and pulled out a handful of something, which he popped into his mouth and happily, it seemed, began to chew on. The paper, however, he wadded up and tossed over the barrier fence. The ball landed gently in the pond and drifted on little waves toward the three friends, who had watched the scene with great interest. Tristan needed no more than a couple of strokes to swim over to the ball of paper, which he snagged with his teeth and brought safely to shore.

“Mmm, does that ever smell good!” he said, sniffing greedily. “Kind of like the stale bread crusts we get on special days. Just more exciting, somehow. I don’t think this is anything to play with, though. It seems you can *eat* paper, too!”

Emmy also eagerly inhaled the divine aroma. But she had to disagree with Tristan: “That’s just the shell – obviously not intended to be eaten. The human wouldn’t have thrown his feed away! Too bad, it really does smell good – lots more interesting than what we get otherwise.”

Sadly, Tristan looked at the crumpled bread bag. But Raul gave him a big smile. “You see?” he said triumphantly. “This odd little shell is the proof. Beyond the fence there are different things to eat than here on our meadow. And that, my friends, means …” – he narrowed his eyes cunningly – “… behind the fence there’s something More.”

Emmy flattened her ears. “Behind the fence? Where the humans are?”

But Tristan looked at Raul excitedly. “Something More? Like maybe more … feed, too?” “Yeah, probably. And who knows what else might be waiting for us out there? Of course, it would require some research first,” murmured Raul. Suddenly, though, his expression darkened. “But to do that you’d have to first get through the barrier. And I have no idea how to

do that.”

Relieved, Emmy nibbled at a daisy.

“I don’t either, Raul. Unfortunately.”

Tristan cleared his throat and once again sniffed in the delightful smell of the paper ball.

“You know, I almost think I might have an idea there,” he said. “Well, maybe.”

Shortly before sundown, after the day’s last feeding, the capybaras started looking for cozy little sleeping spots for the night, cuddling together under the big tree. Only three animals, ears erect, stood on the edge of the meadow. They kept sneaking glances at the entrance door.

The keeper who had brought the feed that evening and had just finished strewing out the last slices of carrots and oranges was about to leave the compound. As soon as he passed Raul, Emmy, and Tristan, they scooted out behind him, close to his heels and running as fast as their short little legs could carry them. They were hoping to secretly slip out the door with the keeper. And to their amazement, the plan really did seem to be working. Their goal was getting closer and closer.

But shortly before reaching the door, the keeper noticed something afoot. He paused, then spun around. Instantly, the capybaras froze in their tracks, lowered their heads, and pretended they were nibbling a little grass on precisely that spot. The keeper was surprised to find the three standing directly behind him. There was something suspicious about it. He observed them for a bit, but then finally just shrugged his shoulders and resumed his march toward the exit. Raul, Emmy, and Tristan immediately resumed shadowing him, trying their best to keep up. Arriving at the door, the keeper grasped the handle before turning around once more. Again, the three dropped their heads and chewed zestfully on a few blades of grass. Now,

however, the man had become distrustful. Eyes glued to the capybaras, he opened the door, stepped out of the enclosure, and, ever so slowly, began to pull the door shut.

Raul saw their only chance of leaving the enclosure growing smaller, inch by inch.

Desperately determined, he sprang forward, fairly galloping toward the closing gap. The keeper screamed in fright and hurried to slam the door. With a mighty leap, Raul soared through the air straight toward him. *Boink!* His head met with hard resistance. The keeper had been quicker. The door was closed.

“Holy herbivores! We messed up!”

Raul took a second run at the door, but – *Conk!* – nothing budged. Emmy lay down on the grass. Tristan stared at the closed door.

“That’s it,” said Raul dejectedly. “Sleeping and eating. And taking an occasional dip in the pond. For a capybara, there is no *More*.”

Glumly, he started making his way back to the big tree. Emmy, head hanging, trotted along behind him. They’d already gone quite a ways when suddenly they heard Tristan shout behind them: “He didn’t lock it! He was so scared he forgot to lock it!”

Open-mouthed, the three looked around. Tristan had been able to stretch up just enough to push down the door handle with the tip of his nose.

They were standing in a small, windowless room. On the walls hung all kinds of gardening tools: various rakes, hoes, and shovels. Stacked in one corner was a pile of those fragrant green rubber boots the keepers always wore. On the left side was a rolled-up garden hose on a big, high table. Across from it, to the right of the entrance, stood several enormous, smooth-sided tubs. And they were filled to the brim with carrots, apples, oranges, and

cucumbers.

“Wow! So here’s where our feed grows!” Tristan was delirious with joy.

Raul gave him a long look. “Hmm, I hardly think so. There’s not even the tiniest patch of soil in here, and even that boring grass on our meadow needs dirt to grow in.”

But Tristan had already poked his head into one of the tubs and was loudly chomping away. Emmy followed his lead.

“Well, okay, as long as we’re here,” sighed Raul, and crunched into a cucumber.

After they’d had their fill, Emmy, unable to contain herself, began jumping around between the table legs. “This is soooo exciting, Raul! Do you realize that we’re the first capybaras *ever* to be here?”

“Now we even know where our feed comes from,” Tristan rejoiced, treating himself to a nibble of the rubber boots.

“Of course I realize that. No capybara before us has ever set paw on this floor.” Head held high, he strode through the little room. “The three of us – we’re the first of our kind to see these walls. Didn’t I tell you that there’s more than just our enclosure?” He indicated the second door in the room. “And can you imagine what’s behind this door?”

Tristan and Emmy looked at him devotedly. “No, we can’t, Raul,” said Emmy.

Tristan said nothing. His mouth was full of carrots. Emmy got a sinking feeling in her stomach.

“What if there’s nothing behind it? Nothing at all?” she worried. “Maybe there’s a deep, black hole behind it, and you fall in and never get out again?”

Raul took a deep breath, and it looked for all the world as if he’d just grown a bit bigger.

“For us it’s just one small step. But how will it change the lives of the other capybaras when we find out, at last, what other things surround our meadow? Imagine how it will feel to know how much More there really is.”

Raul’s steady, calm voice filled the room. Tristan even stopped chewing for a second. They all knew what they would do next.

With a shaky leg-up maneuver they managed to open the next door as well. Raul was the first to climb over the threshold and step out onto a small courtyard. In the darkness loomed the outlines of benches. The three capybaras edged forward, strange scents wafting into their noses: scents of animals – of big, dangerous animals – and of old food, of apple cores and banana peels and sweet stuff. At the other end of the courtyard, a little house rose up out of the shadows, apparently a feeding area for humans. The splendid aroma that emanated from it was strongly reminiscent of the paper ball that Tristan had fished out of the water.

Bravely, Raul forged ahead. Emmy and Tristan, huddled side-by-side, followed. All at once the cloud cover parted, and bright, shimmering moonlight pushed the darkness back to the edges of the little plaza. Raul, courageous and confident, stepped into the middle of the now brightly lit area and lifted his snout up to the nighttime sky. Emmy and Tristan held their breath.

In this moment, there seemed to be nothing more than Raul and the moonlight. All the dangers and uncertainties that might be lurking out there paled.

Slowly, Raul turned around and padded back to Emmy and Tristan.

“Raul, that was … that was so … unbelievably beautiful,” whispered Emmy.

“Coolest thing ever,” Tristan agreed.

Raul nodded and closed his eyes.

The three of them stood in the courtyard for a while, inhaling the unfamiliar smells. They couldn't exactly explain why, but they knew something had changed. Tomorrow, everything would be different. They sensed it all the way down to the tips of their whiskers.

They took one last look around the courtyard and the undiscovered possibilities that lay before them. Then they toddled off, tired but light-footed, back to their enclosure. The other capybaras were already fast asleep under the big tree. Contented, Raul, Emmy, and Tristan cuddled up next to its trunk. And as they drifted off to sleep, they were already imagining what adventures the following day might bring. Out there in the great big More.

Chapter 3

The Birthday Broccoli

“What in the world are they doing over there?” Emmy was standing at the fence and regarding the playground beyond with raised eyebrows.

“No idea. Looks like a lot of fun, though,” said Raul, sitting down next to her. On the playground behind the gate, several humans, both big and small, were seated at one of the wooden tables. They seemed to be happy about something.

“Would you look at that? Now they’re singing. And clapping their hands. And over there … well, what the heck *is* he doing?”

Bewildered, Raul and Emmy watched as the smallest human eagerly proceeded to tear apart colorfully wrapped boxes, wildly throwing the loosened shreds of paper all around himself. The big two-leggeds stood around with blissful expressions on their faces, energetically

encouraging their little pup to destroy more packages. Tristan, who had just come trotting up, shook his head.

“These humans are batty!” he commented disdainfully. As the three capybaras continued to watch in astonishment, they heard a familiar voice next to them croak: “They kraall that a birthday party.”

And a second voice confirmed: “Kraarect! A birthday party!”

“André! René!” They were delighted to see their raven friends.

“A birthday party?” asked Tristan, interested.

“Is that something like a special feeding?”

“You celebrate your birthday. With kraake and presents, and so on.”

“But what’s a birthday, anyway?”

The clueless capybaras gawked at the two birds, who turned up their beaks.

“You don’t know what a birthday is? Kraa! That’s the day you kraawled out of the egg.

And every year on exactly this day there’s a party. A kraammemoration, so to speak.”

“And everyone gets together, with a yummy kraake and songs and a party mood.”

Raul, Emmy, and Tristan were entranced. “Oh! Couldn’t we do something like that, too?

With presents and everyone in a happy mood? Everyone celebrating? A real party. Wouldn’t that be great?”

“And with *especially* good food,” Tristan added.

Raul’s spirit of discovery had also been awakened. “Never before has there been any sort of festival on this meadow, let alone a birthday party. We would be the very first capybaras to celebrate a birthday!”

“Kraa! And when are your birthdays?” The ravens interrupted the joyous planning

session. Surprised, the capybaras looked from one bird to the other. They didn't have a precise answer to that question.

“Hmm, my mama always told me that I came into the world on a balmy summer day. Must have been after the last feeding,” Raul mused. “Or maybe it was in the spring? Either way, it could be quite soon, then. Couldn't it?”

Emmy also tried to remember. “They always told me I was a very curious pup. With big blue googly eyes.”

And Tristan was able to add: “They said I was very hungry a lot of the time. But that doesn't really help us out now, either.”

Disappointed, they hung their heads. The birthday party receded into the distance. No birthday, no party; that much was obvious.

“Kraa! Now just banish that ‘Nevermore’ attitude,” quoth the ravens. “Kraa-baby capybaras are unbearable. If you're not sure when your birthdays are, then just pick your own day.”

Raul looked up. “Would tomorrow be okay, then?”

“B R O C C O L I !!!”

Drowsily, Raul and Tristan opened their eyes.

“Ummm, what was that? And good morning to you, too,” yawned Tristan.

“Broccoli!” Emmy energetically repeated her demand.

“Broccoli. Fine. Is there any more to say on that subject, or is that all you wanted to share with us?” Before he'd had his breakfast, Raul could be a little irritable.

Emmy looked up in the sky and watched the clouds drifting by. “Do you guys remember

that time the keeper got the feed buckets mixed up? And we accidentally got the guinea pig feed? That was the first and only time we ate broccoli.”

“Oh, yeah, that was so great,” Tristan agreed.

“And I want to have broccoli on my birthday. To celebrate. That would really be something special, wouldn’t it?”

Emmy smiled as she pictured those juicy stalks of broccoli. So did Tristan. Raul was skeptical. “And how, pray tell, would we manage to get the guinea pigs’ broccoli?”

But Emmy wouldn’t let it go. They decided they’d first ask the ravens for their advice. After all, those two knew everything that went on between the various enclosures. And André and René were indeed able to help them.

“Good idea, that with the birthday brokraali. The guinea pigs live over there; you just have to walk akraass the playkraand,” they croaked.

Raul, Emmy, and Tristan sat down in the grass before them and asked, as sweetly as they could: “Could you maybe just make a quick flight over there and ask them if we can have a small head of broccoli? After all, it’s our birthday!”

The ravens balked a little at that, but finally did stretch out their wings and promise to fly over and ask the guinea pigs.

“And?” Emmy asked when, after quite some time, the ravens came flying back. “What did they say?”

“Kraa! They said yes, basikraally. But …”

The ravens, uneasy, shifted from one leg to the other.

“Well, what, then? Do they have some broccoli for us, or not?”

“They have enough brokraali, it’s just that … they want to have something in exchange for it.”

Tristan sniffed contemptuously. “Not really the way to treat relatives. But – okay. What do the little scoundrels want in exchange?”

The ravens continued to hem and haw. “Kraa, it’s like this: the guinea pigs think the floor in their sleeping kraarters is too hard. And they’d like something to kraashion it,” André finally explained.

“Specifikraally,” croaked René, “they demanded a few pelikraan feathers.”

The three birthday celebrants were gobsmacked. They certainly hadn’t expected anything like that in return.

“Those pigs!! That’s outrageous!” Raul fumed.

“Where in the world are we supposed to get pelican feathers?”

“Couldn’t you maybe go to the pelicans …?” Emmy batted her eyes at the ravens.

“Kraa, we’ve already been there.” Avoiding eye contact, the ravens looked down at their talons. “And the pelikraans would give you a few of their feathers.”

“Well, that’s great news!” a gleeful Emmy said, hopping around excitedly.

“You haven’t heard yet what the pelikraans would like in return for their feathers.”

Emmy stopped hopping. “They want something, too?”

The ravens whispered through tightly clasped beaks: “The pelikraans would like to have a certain kind of fish in exchange. Namely, the sort of fish the seals get as feed.”

The capybaras sank down on the meadow. Raul asked wearily: “And I assume the seals also want something for their fish?”

“Kraarect, they want something,” murmured the ravens, flapping around nervously in

front of the fence. Raul was losing his patience.

“Okay, so what do the seals want for their fish?”

“They’re betting that none of you will dare to swim akraass their pond tonight. Only if one of you does will they give you the fish.”

Three capybaras suddenly felt their fur stand on end. The thought of swimming by night through a deep, unfamiliar pond crawling with big, wet, black seals was not exactly appealing. Emmy lifted her nose. “Well, that’s that. I guess it was too good to be true, anyway. But thanks for going to the trouble of asking.”

Even Raul gave up. That was a request too far. Yes, they were good swimmers, but as a wise old proverb had it: “Though capable in water, a capybara’s not an otter.”

No capybara on the planet was death-defyingly audacious enough to plunge into icy, black, seal-infested waters in the dead of night.

“It’s a kraaing shame. Your birthday party would have been interesting.”

Distressed, the ravens turned to watch a butterfly flitting by.

“I’ll do it!” Tristan burst out into the somber mood. “Swimming for the fish, the fish for the feathers, the feathers for the broccoli, the broccoli for the birthday. It should all be doable.”

Stunned, the others looked at him.

“I’ve always wanted to try out a different swimming hole.”

Deep, black, and mysterious was the water in front of them. Little waves gently lapped against the big glass panel where the three capybaras stood closely huddled together. They stared through the glass into the water, trying in vain to make out a few shapes contained within. Not a single animal, tailfin, or motion could be discerned. Only a sinister, bottomless Nothing.

“So it’s true. The door is always open,” whispered Emmy. “Do you think the keepers noticed anything this time?”

Raul raised a wary eyebrow: “I’m less worried about that than I am this water. Something’s not right. Is all seawater actually *can’t*-see water? And why aren’t there any animals in there?”

Emmy turned around. “You don’t really have to do this, Tristan. We won’t be mad at you, honest. We can celebrate our birthday without broccoli.”

Just at that moment, a gigantic, ghostly form glided by behind the glass. Startled, Emmy and Raul jumped back. But Tristan just sniffed the air and swayed his head back and forth, appraising the situation.

“Hmm … if we want to have broccoli on our birthday, then we’ll just have to get a head of broccoli. No way around it. A capybara’s gotta do what a capybara’s gotta do. So come on, help me over this weird fence! I can’t manage it by myself.”

Raul shrugged his shoulders, threw Tristan an admiring glance, and took his spot where the glass pane sloped down lowest. Emmy whimpered softly but climbed skillfully onto Raul’s back.

“Hurry – we can’t hold this much longer,” groaned Raul. Tristan looked around himself. The stars twinkled overhead, the wind riffled his fur. Should he really …?

“Tristan!” wheezed Emmy. “Now!”

And Tristan flared his nostrils and ran. And never in his life had he run so fast and so lightly. Like a little arrow he flew toward Raul and Emmy, who were beginning to wobble alarmingly. Powerfully, Tristan pushed off the ground. For one brief moment, the world seemed to stand still. He glided through the air, his front legs finding Raul’s back end, and with a single, elegant movement swung himself high onto Emmy’s back. Noble snout held high, he reached up

toward the pool. But the capybara tower teetered. Bit by bit, they were losing their balance, threatening to fall backward. Raul’s knees were giving way. Emmy’s entire body was trembling. The sheet of glass was moving further and further away from their eyes. Not much longer and the tower would come tumbling down. But way up on the tippy top of the tower stood Tristan and shrieked: “BROCCOLI!”

And one last time, Raul rammed his back legs into the ground, Emmy gathered every ounce of her strength and shifted her weight to the front, and Tristan, front paws hanging free, balanced himself on her shoulders.

Like building blocks all a-tumble, they crashed against the pane. *Thud, thud!*

It took Emmy a few moments to untangle herself from Raul’s legs. Dazed, she got to her feet.

“Raul, where did Tristan go?” She looked around frantically.

Wherever could he be? But already she heard water bubbling up. Tristan had done it! He’d launched himself up and over the top of the barrier, landing in the middle of the seals’ pool. And now he was resurfacing. Looking through the glass, Raul and Emmy could vaguely make out his paws thrashing.