Name: _____ Date: _____

How the Rhinoceros Got His Skin

Reading level 10 (6th grade) · 727 words

Before you read: Why does a rhinoceros have such baggy, wrinkly skin? This story has a very silly answer.

Have you ever wondered why a rhinoceros wears such a baggy, wrinkly skin, with great folds at the shoulders and knees? This is how it happened, Best Beloved. Once upon a time, on an island by the shores of the Red Sea, there lived a Baker. His tall hat shone in the sun with a dazzling splendour. He lived all by himself, with nothing but his hat and his knife and a cooking-stove of the kind you must never touch.

One day he took flour and water and currants and plums and sugar, and he made himself one cake. It was two feet across and three feet thick. He baked it and baked it till it was brown all over and smelled most delicious. But just as he was going to eat it, down to the beach came a Rhinoceros, stomping from the wild inside of the island. He had a horn on his nose, two piggy eyes, and no manners at all.

In those days the Rhinoceros's skin fitted him quite tight, smooth as a raincoat, with no wrinkles in it anywhere. "How!" he said, which was very rude, and the Baker dropped his knife and scrambled up a palm tree, with nothing on but his hat. The Rhinoceros knocked over the stove with his nose, and the cake rolled away on the sand. He spiked that cake on his horn, and he ate it all up, every crumb, without one word of thanks.

Then he went away, waving his tail, into the wild inside of the island, where nobody ever goes. The Baker came down from his palm tree and set the stove back on its legs. He looked at the empty sand where his cake had been. Then he said a rhyme: "Them that takes cakes which the Baker-man bakes makes dreadful mistakes." And there was a great deal more in that rhyme than you would think.

Five weeks later there was a heat wave in the Red Sea, so hot that the rocks sizzled. Everybody took off all the clothes they had. The Baker took off his hat. But the Rhinoceros took off his skin, because in those days it buttoned underneath with three buttons, and he carried it over his shoulder down to the beach. He said nothing at all about the Baker's cake, because he had eaten it all, and he did not feel a bit sorry.

He waddled straight into the water and blew bubbles through his nose, and he left his skin lying on the beach. Presently the Baker came by and found it. He smiled a smile that ran all around his face twice. "Aha!" he whispered. Then he danced three times round the skin and rubbed his hands. He hurried back to his camp and filled his hat with cake crumbs, for the Baker never ate anything but cake, and he never swept out his camp.

He took that skin, and he shook that skin. He rubbed that skin as full of old, dry, stale, tickly cake crumbs and burnt currants as it could possibly hold. Then he climbed back up his palm tree and waited. Out of the water came the Rhinoceros, and he buttoned up his skin with its three buttons. At once it tickled, like crumbs in bed. He wanted to scratch, but scratching only made it worse.

He lay down on the sand and rolled and rolled and rolled, and every time he rolled, the crumbs tickled him worse and worse and worse. "Ow! Ooh! Itchy!" he grunted. He ran to the palm tree and rubbed and rubbed and rubbed against it. He rubbed so hard that he rubbed his skin into a great fold over his shoulders, and another fold underneath, where the buttons used to be. He rubbed off the buttons, too, and some more folds over his legs.

It spoiled his temper, but it made no difference to the cake crumbs. They were still inside, and they still tickled. So he went home, very angry and horribly scratchy. And from that day to this, every rhinoceros has great folds in his skin and a very bad temper, all because of the cake crumbs inside. And the Baker came down from his palm tree, wearing his hat, packed up his stove, and went away to the far-off places he came from.

Questions

1. Why did the Baker fill the skin with crumbs?

A. He wanted to keep the skin warm
B. He was paying the Rhinoceros back for eating his cake
C. He was cleaning his camp

2. What did the Baker put inside the Rhinoceros's skin?

A. Cake crumbs and burnt currants
B. Sand
C. Feathers

3. Why did the Rhinoceros rub himself on the palm tree?

A. He liked the tree
B. He wanted to get clean
C. The crumbs tickled him

4. In this story, "manners" are --

A. ways of behaving politely
B. kinds of cake
C. island weather

5. What does the Baker's rhyme warn about?

A. Taking what is not yours can cost you later
B. Baking too many cakes

C. Climbing palm trees

6. Why do rhinoceroses have folds in their skin, in this story?

A. They are old

B. They were rubbed that way when crumbs tickled the first one

C. They need extra skin

Words to know

manners: polite habits
waddled: walked side-to-side
splendour: grand brightness
stale: old and dry
wrinkles: little folds

Answer key: How the Rhinoceros Got His Skin

1. B. He was paying the Rhinoceros back for eating his cake
2. A. Cake crumbs and burnt currants
3. C. The crumbs tickled him
4. A. ways of behaving politely
5. A. Taking what is not yours can cost you later
6. B. They were rubbed that way when crumbs tickled the first one