

YOUR BRILLIANT BRAIN

(a book about complex
childhood trauma)

Written by Belinda Thomson
Illustrated by Natasha Chow





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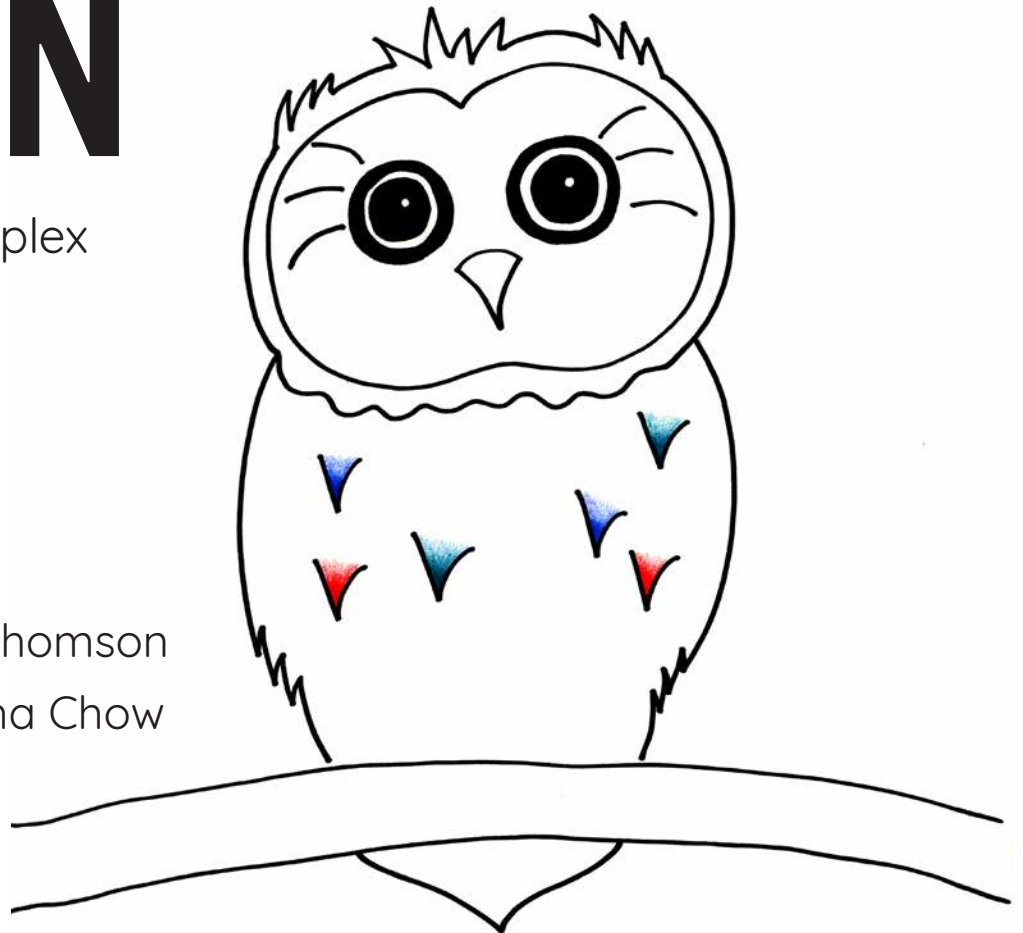
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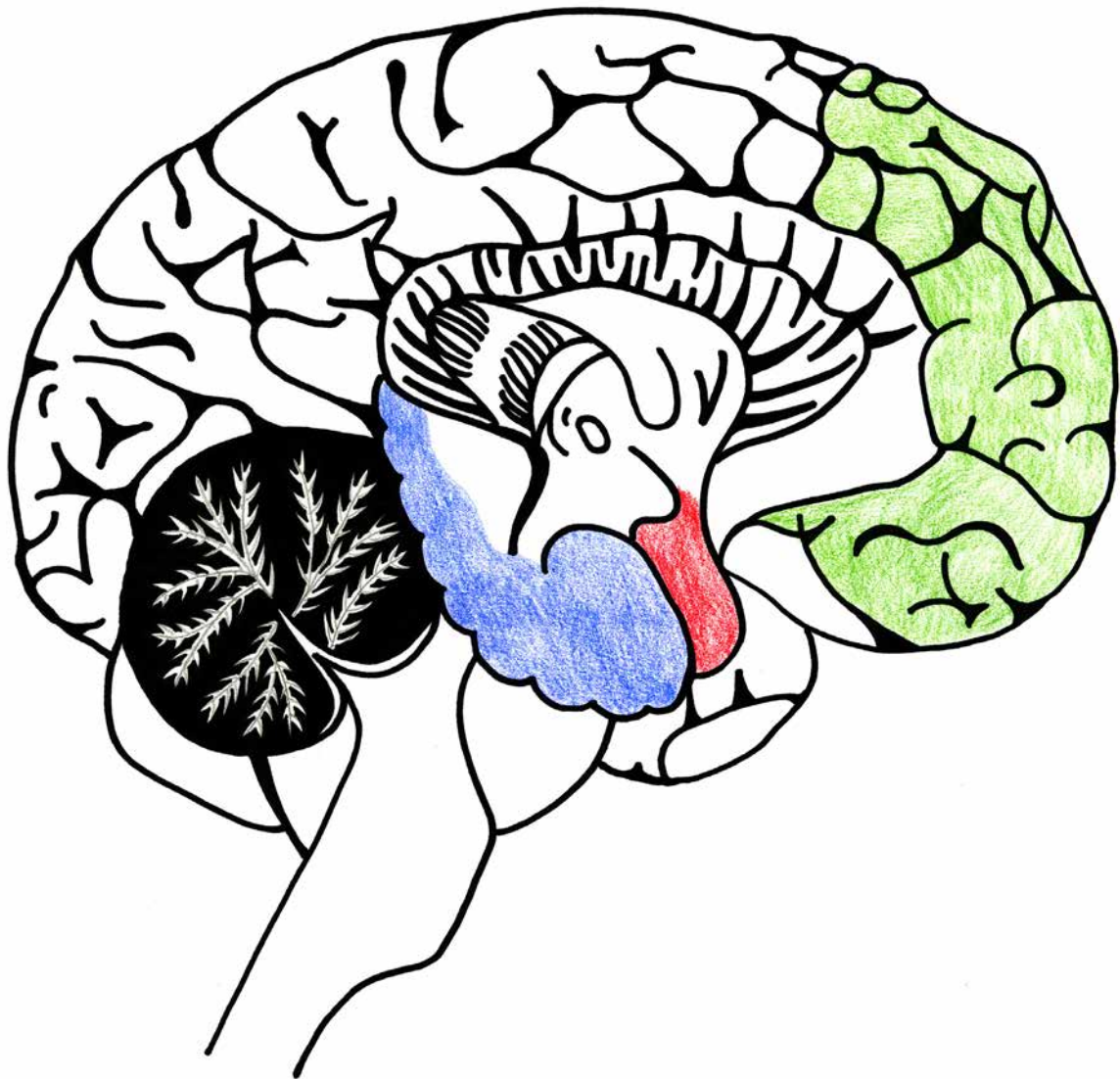
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Your brain looks a bit like this.



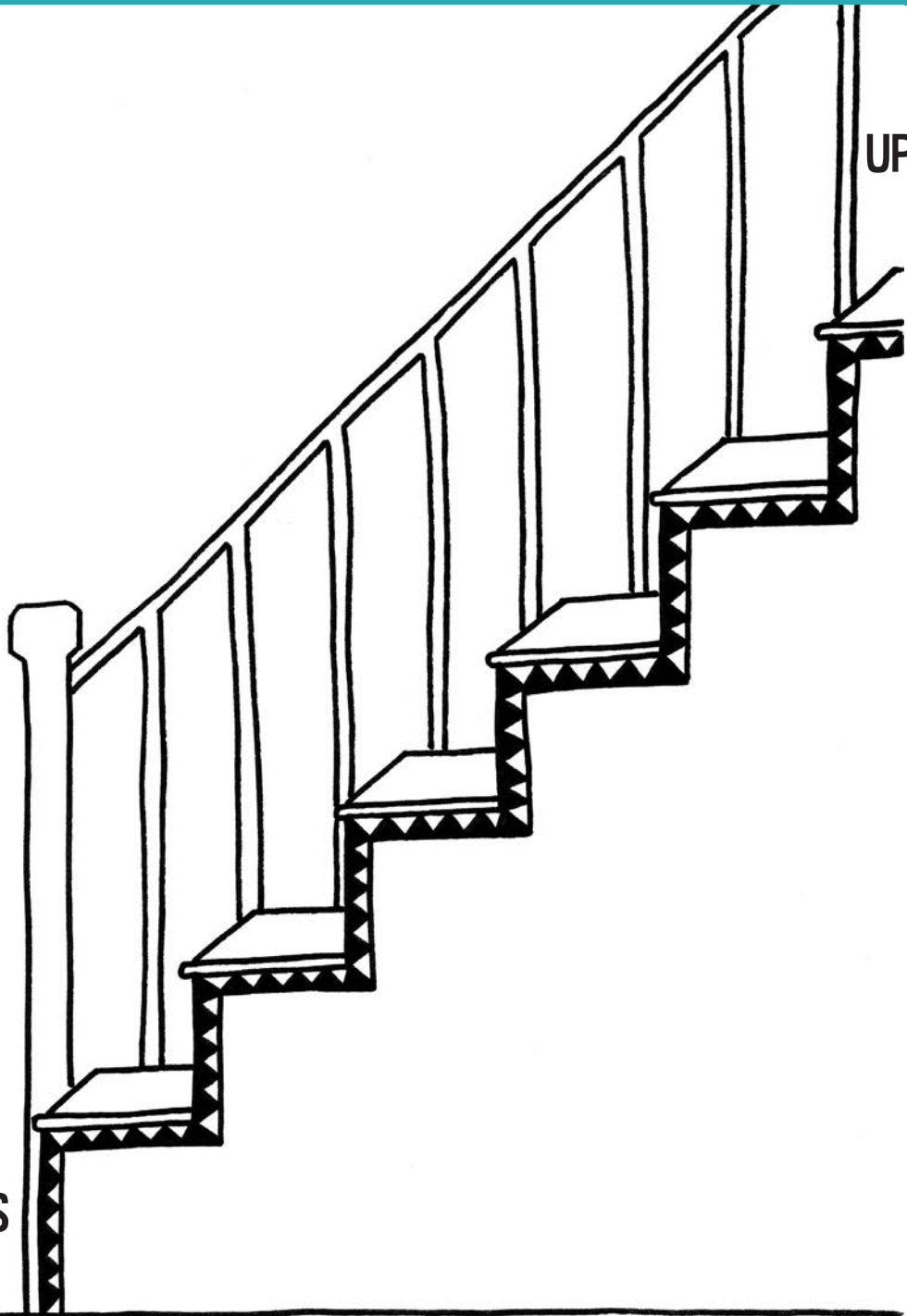
How big is your brain?
Put your two fists together.
That is about how big your brain is.

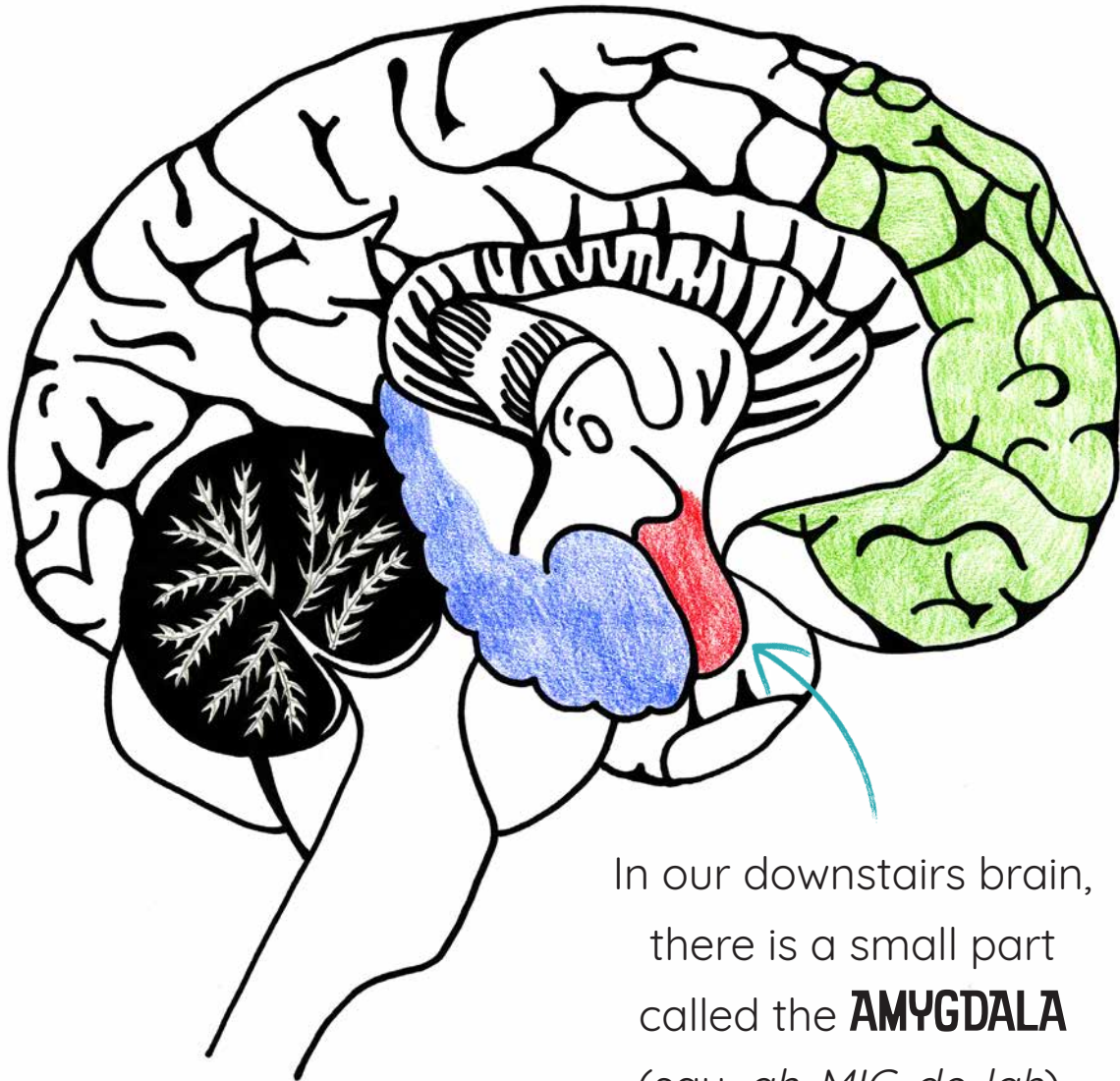


Some people say that your
brain has an upstairs part
and a downstairs part.

DOWNSTAIRS

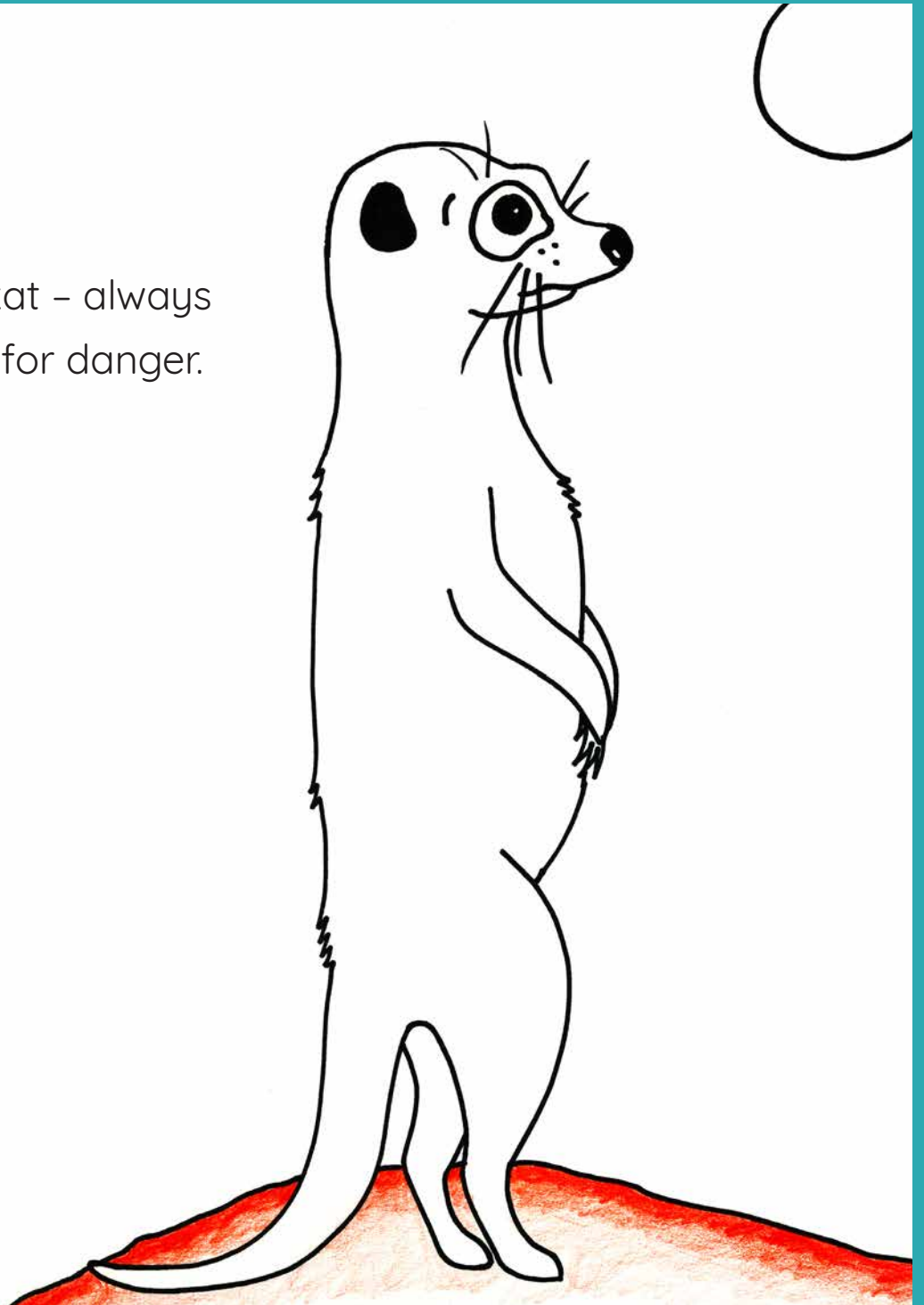
UPSTAIRS

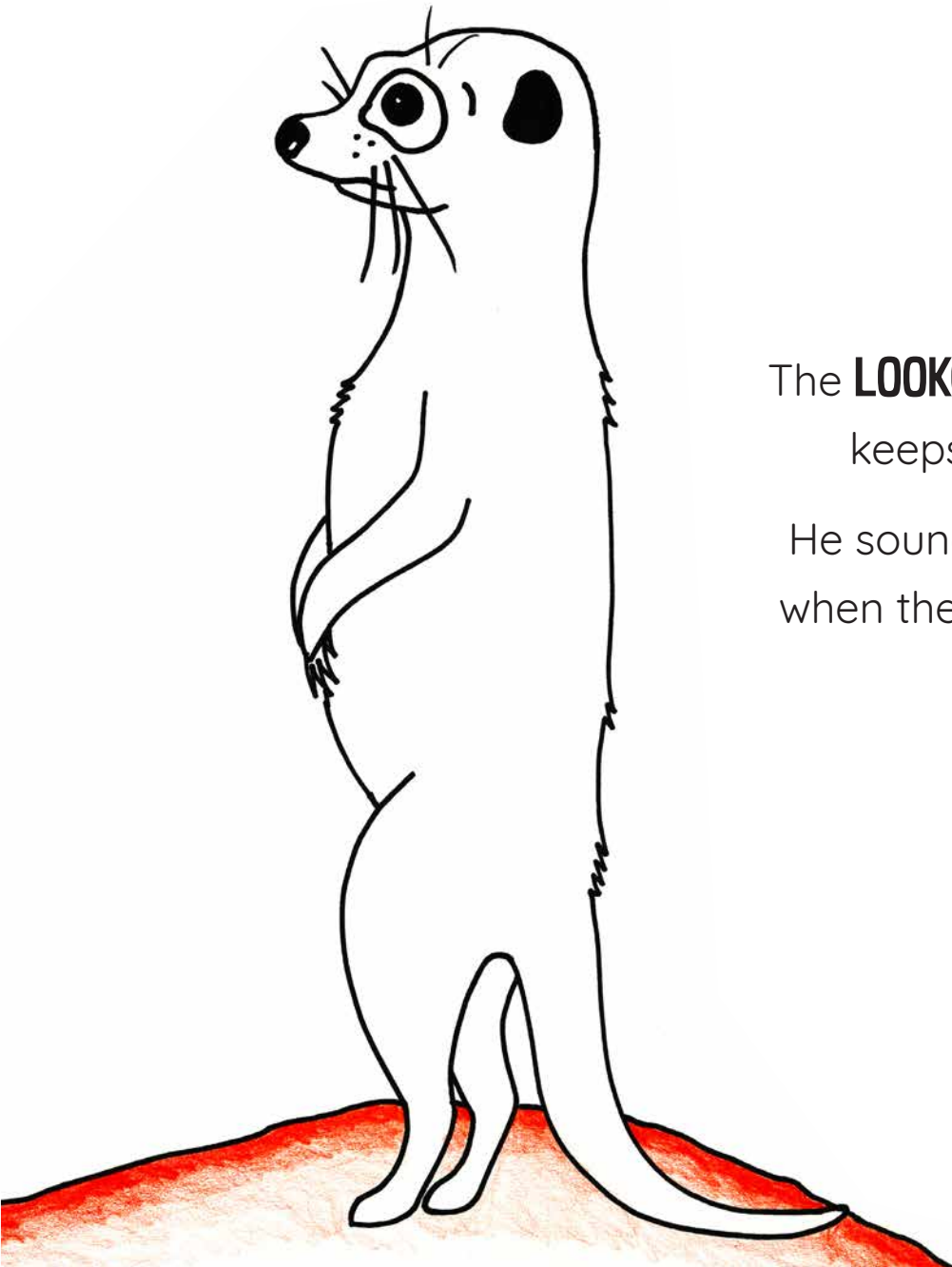




In our downstairs brain, there is a small part called the **AMYGDALA** (say, *ah-MIG-de-lah*).

It's like a meerkat - always
on the lookout for danger.



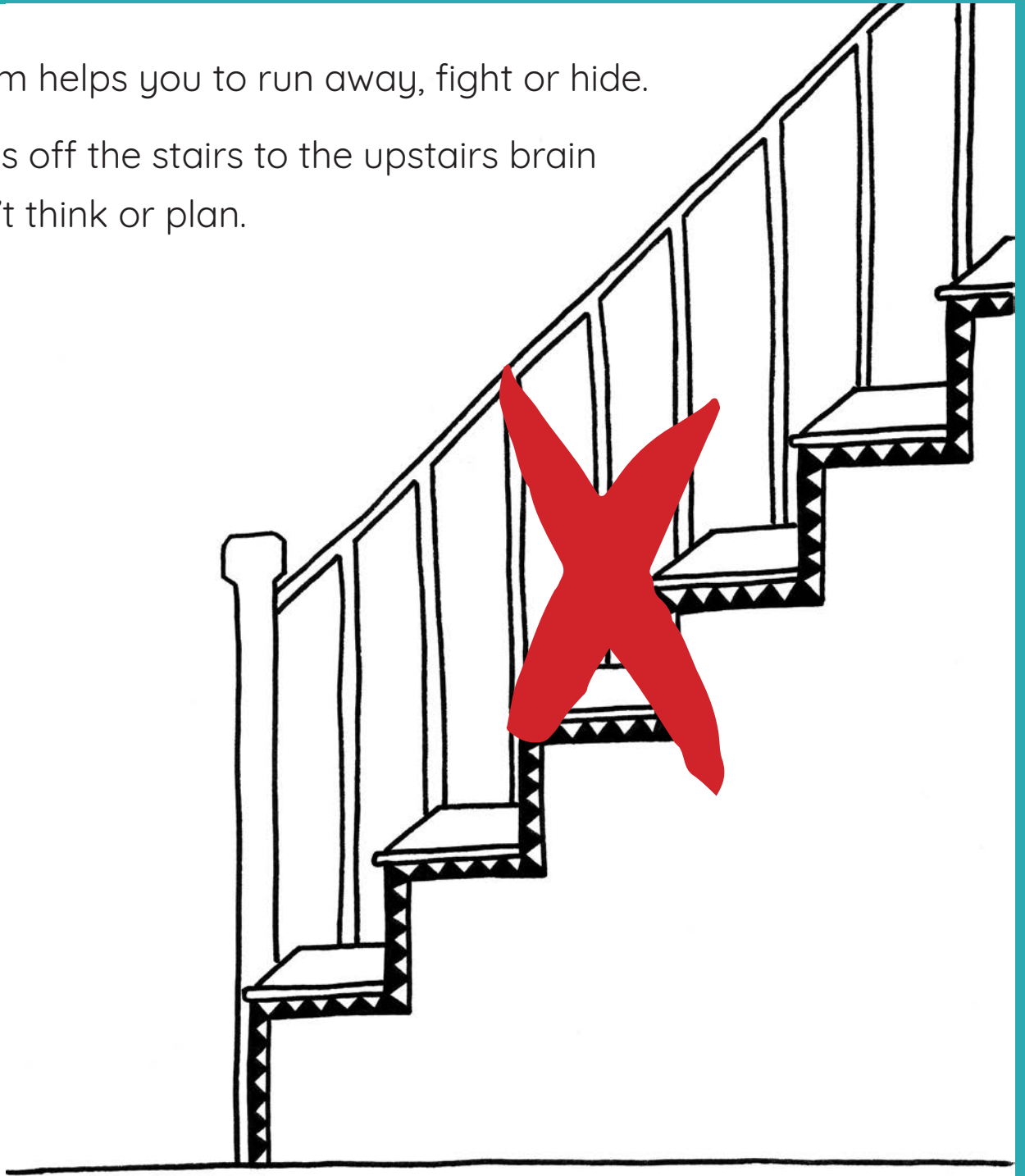


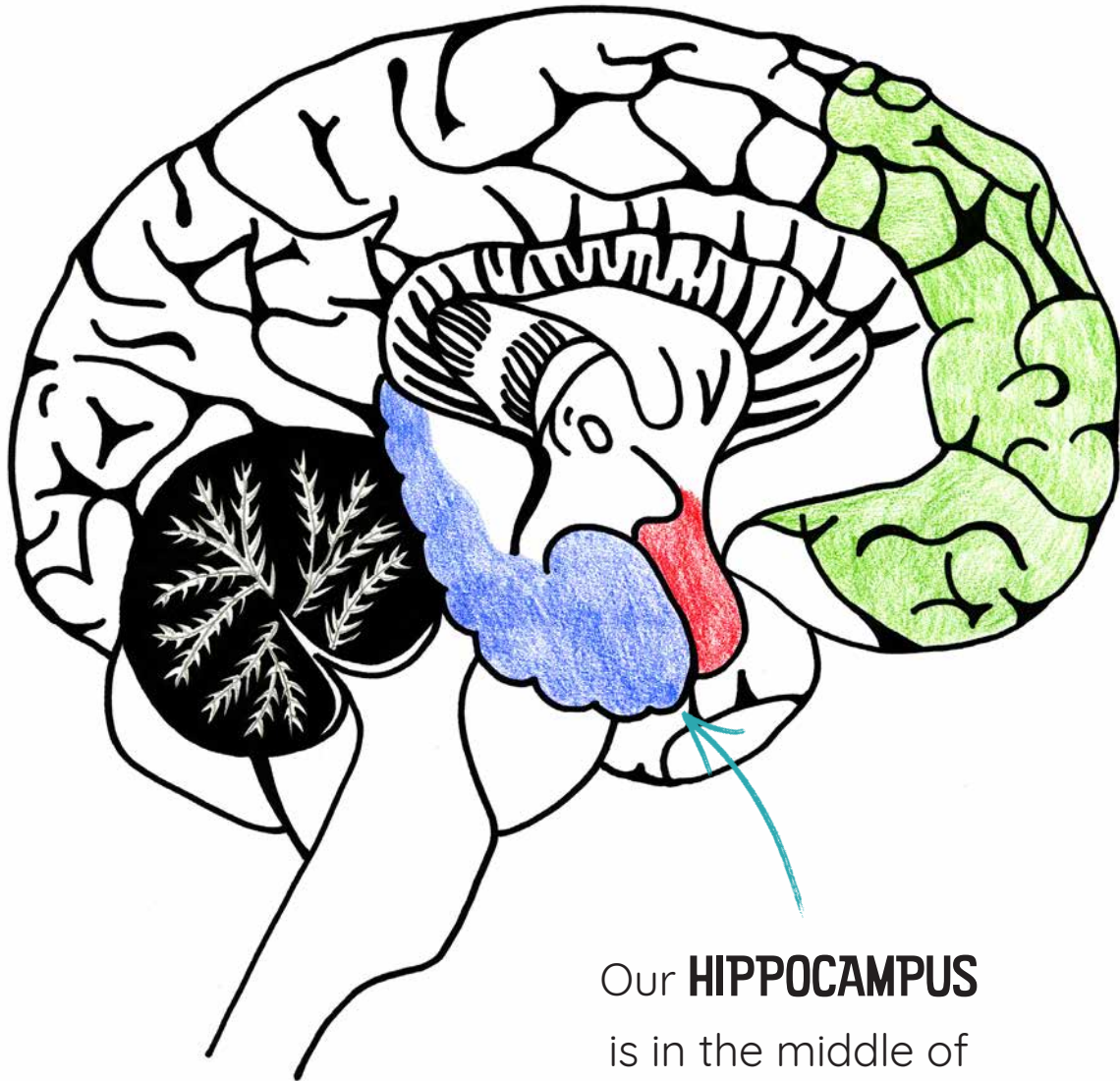
The **LOOKOUT MEERKAT**
keeps us safe.

He sounds an alarm
when there is danger.

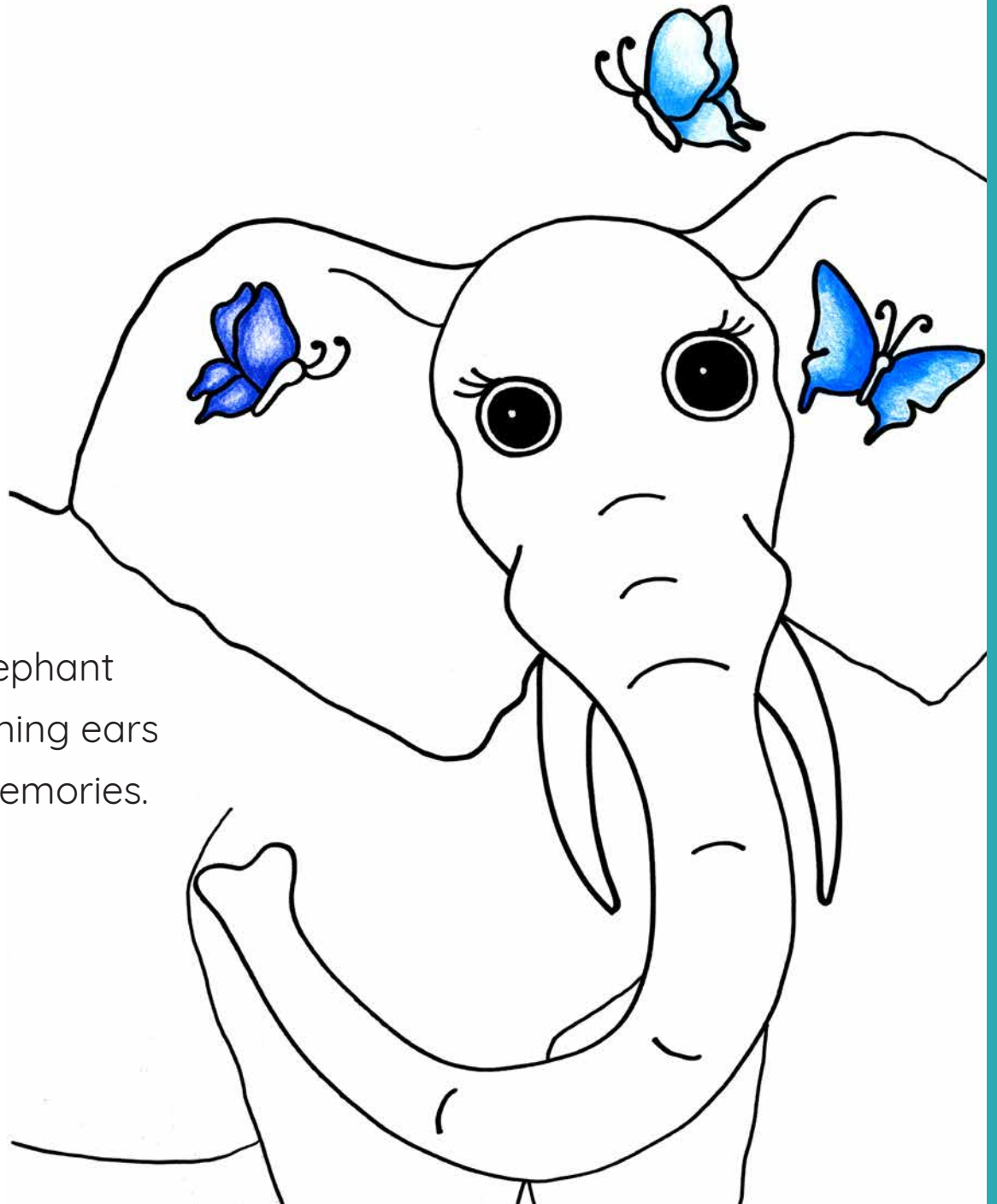
The alarm helps you to run away, fight or hide.

He blocks off the stairs to the upstairs brain so it can't think or plan.





Our **HIPPOCAMPUS**
is in the middle of
your brain halfway
down the stairs.



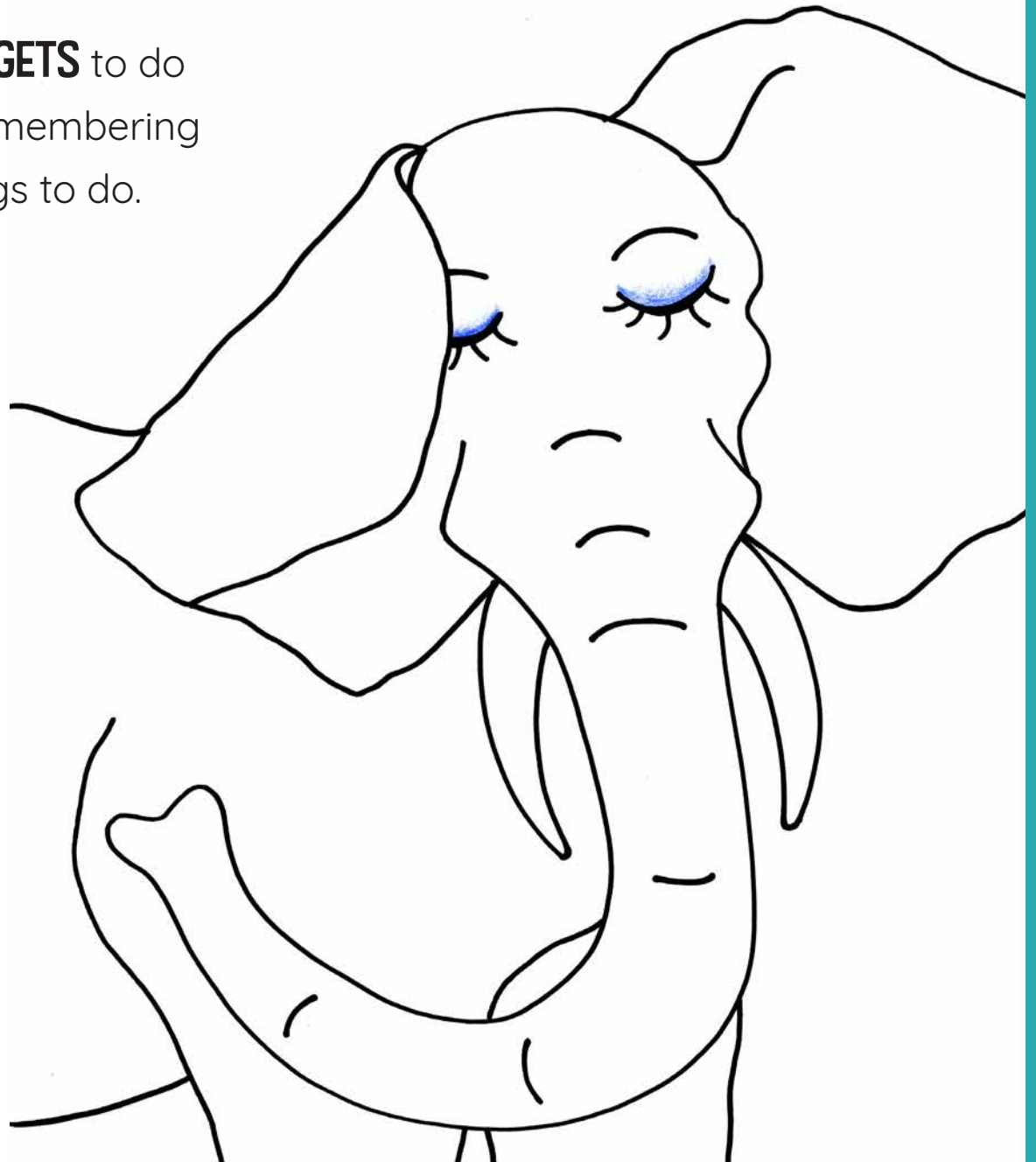
It's like an elephant
with big listening ears
for saving memories.

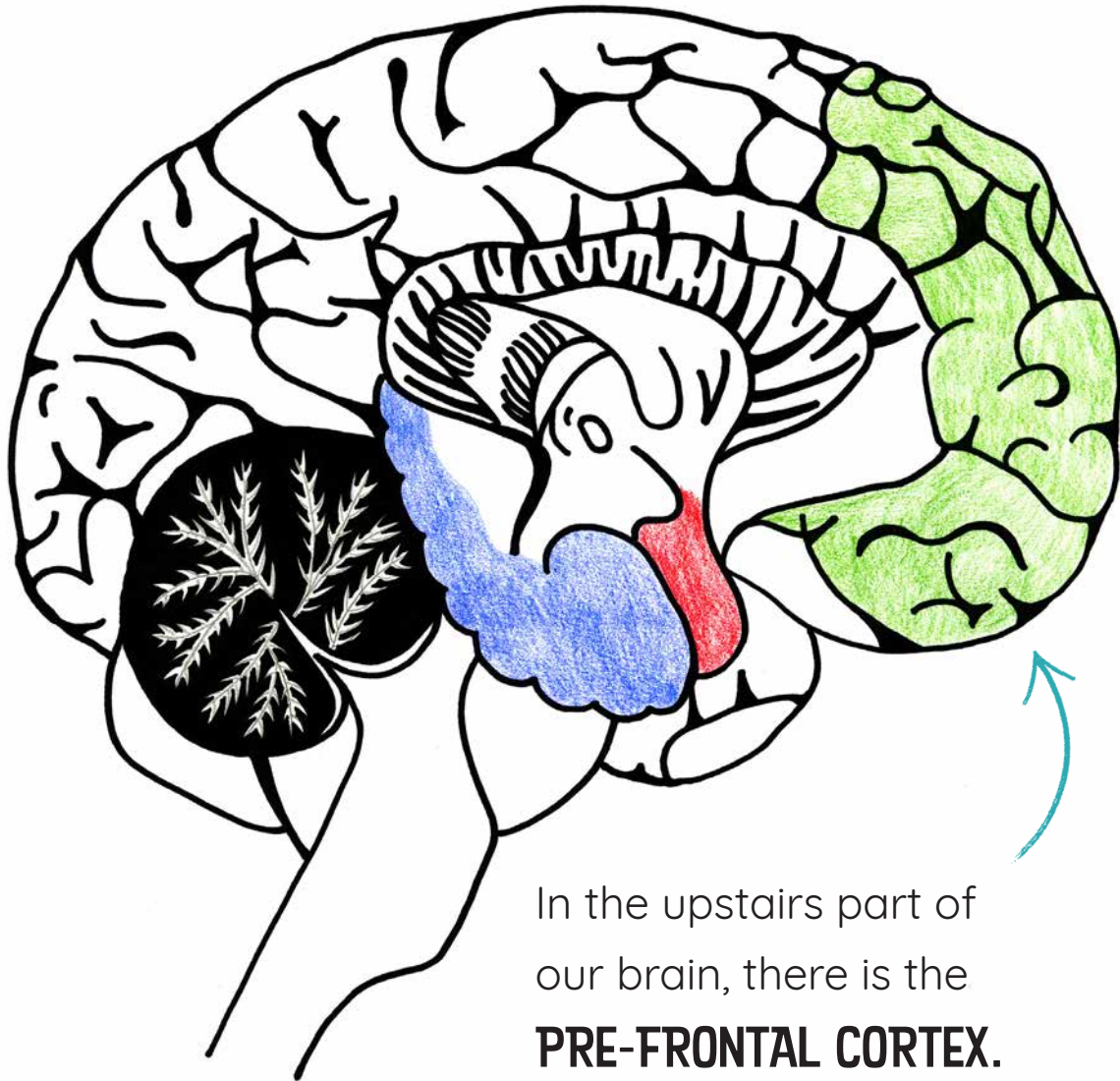
Our **LiSTENiNG ELEPHANT** helps us remember things.

At school it helps you remember your lessons.

But it stops listening when the
LOOKOUT MEERKAT sounds an alarm.

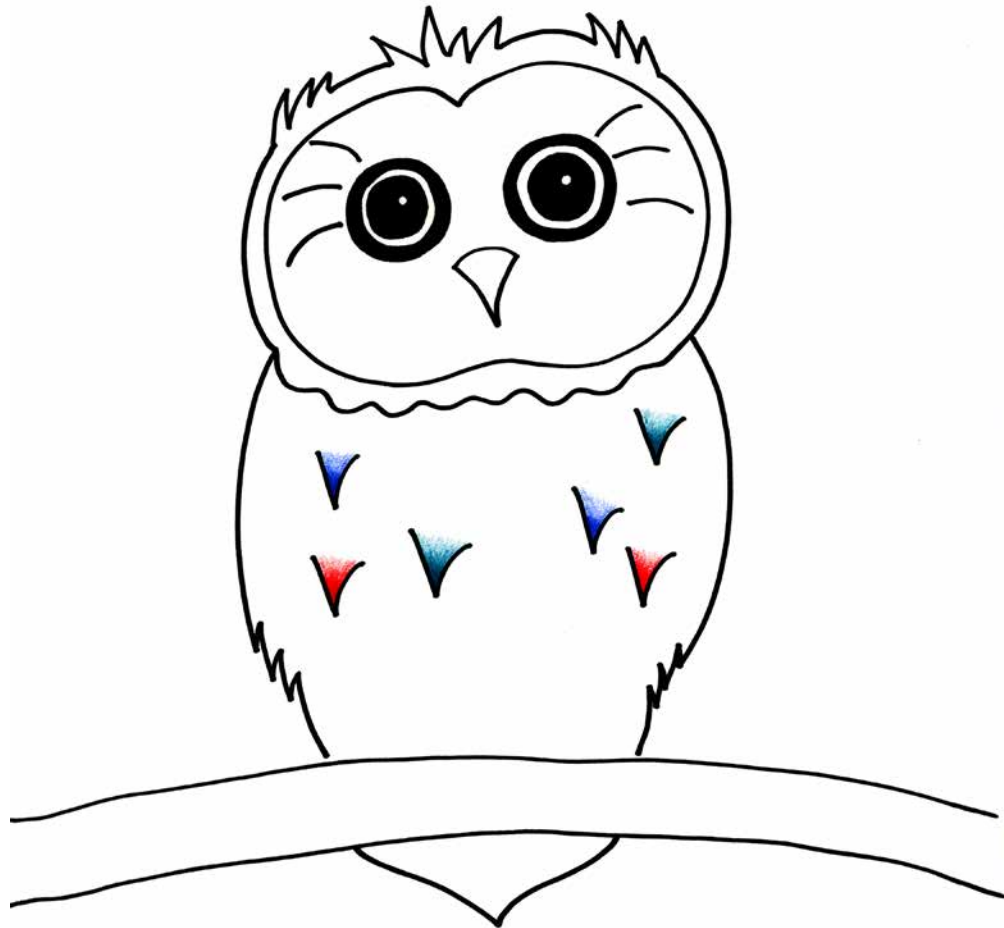
Then it **FORGETS** to do
its job of remembering
helpful things to do.





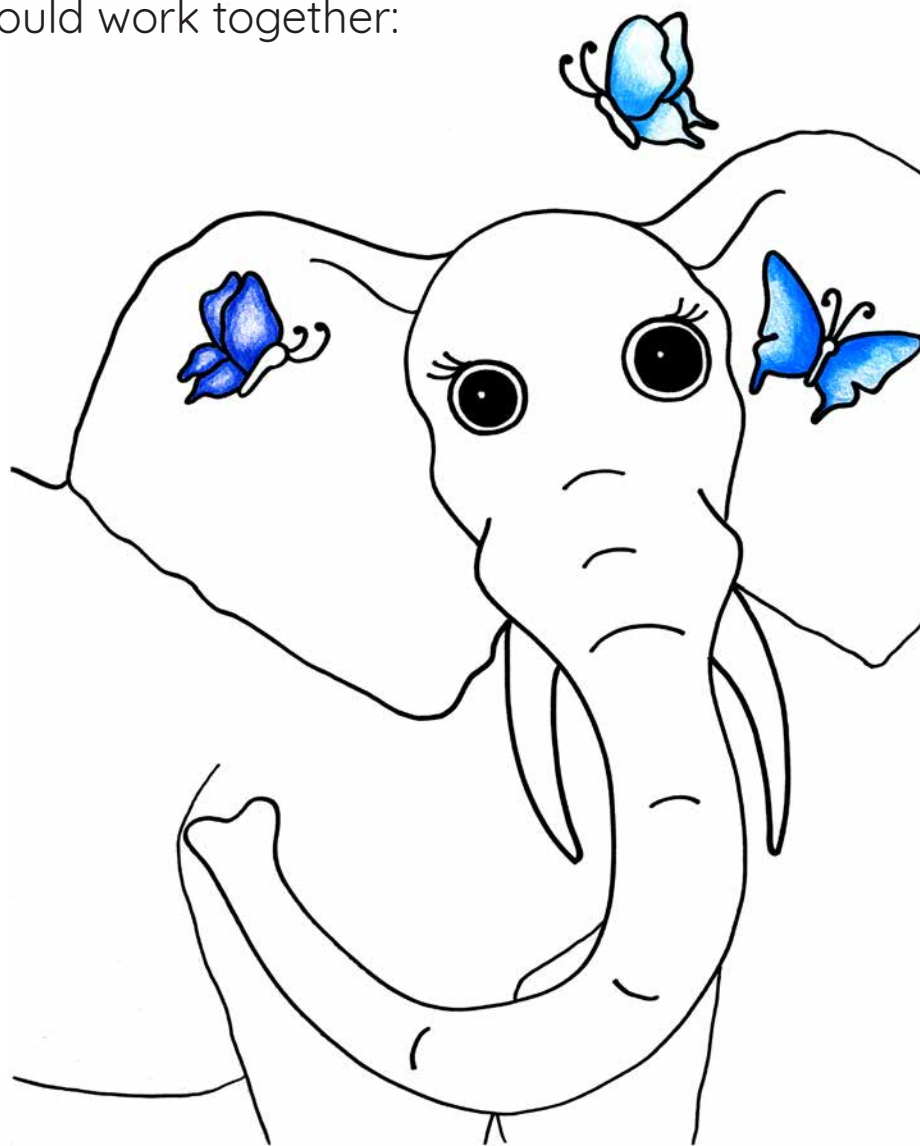
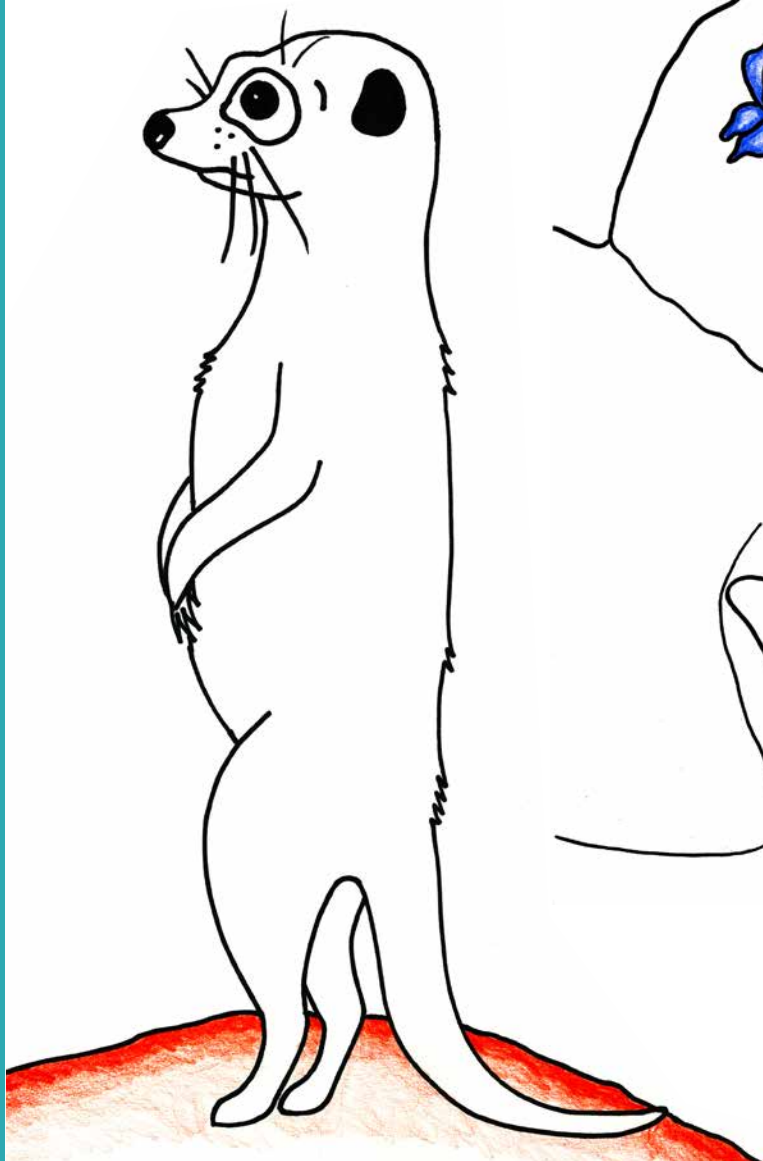
In the upstairs part of
our brain, there is the
PRE-FRONTAL CORTEX.

It's like a **WiSE OWL** -
thinking, problem-solving,
being careful and helpful.

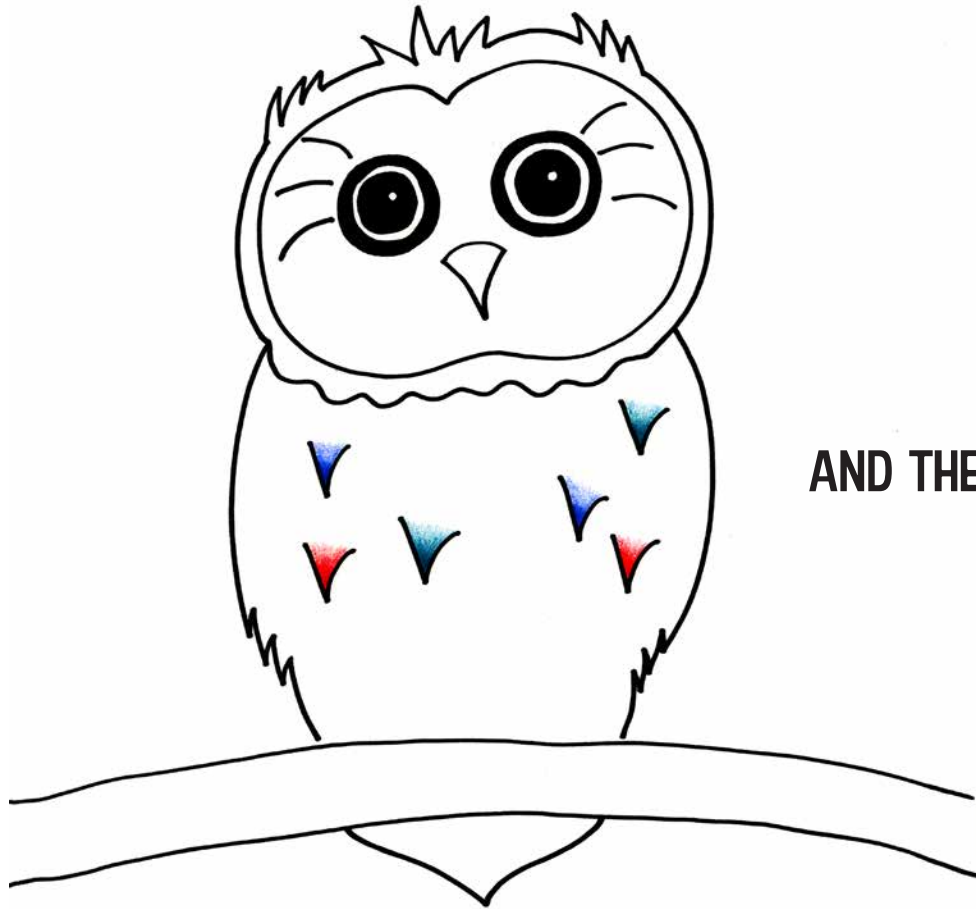


All parts of our brain should work together:

THE LOOKOUT MEERKAT,



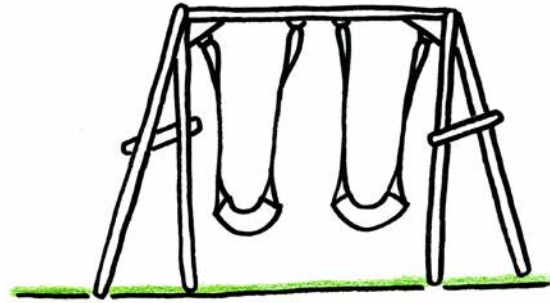
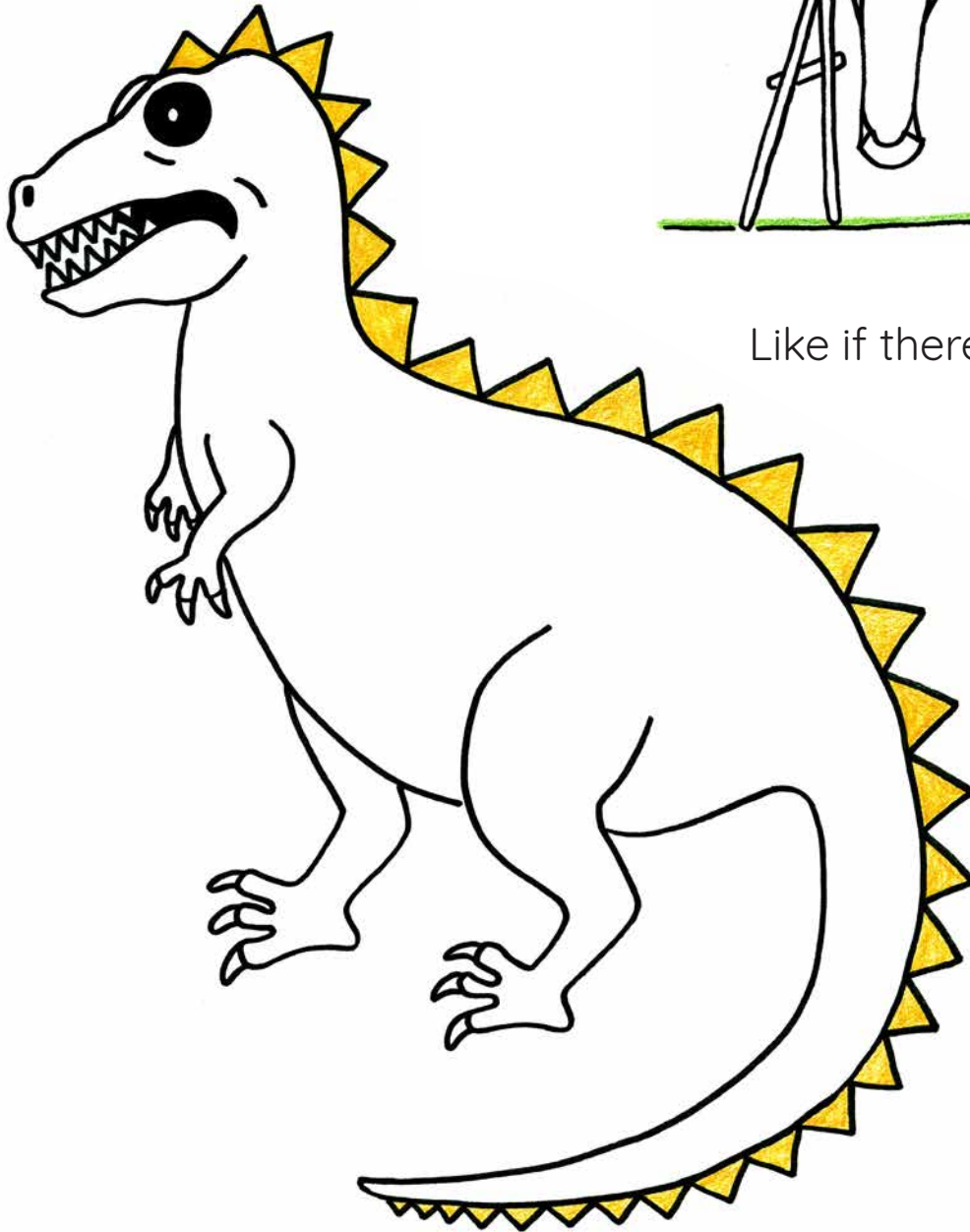
THE LISTENING ELEPHANT,



AND THE WISE OWL.

They use the stairs to work together and visit each other.

Sometimes the **LOOKOUT MEERKAT**
sounds the alarm when there is danger.

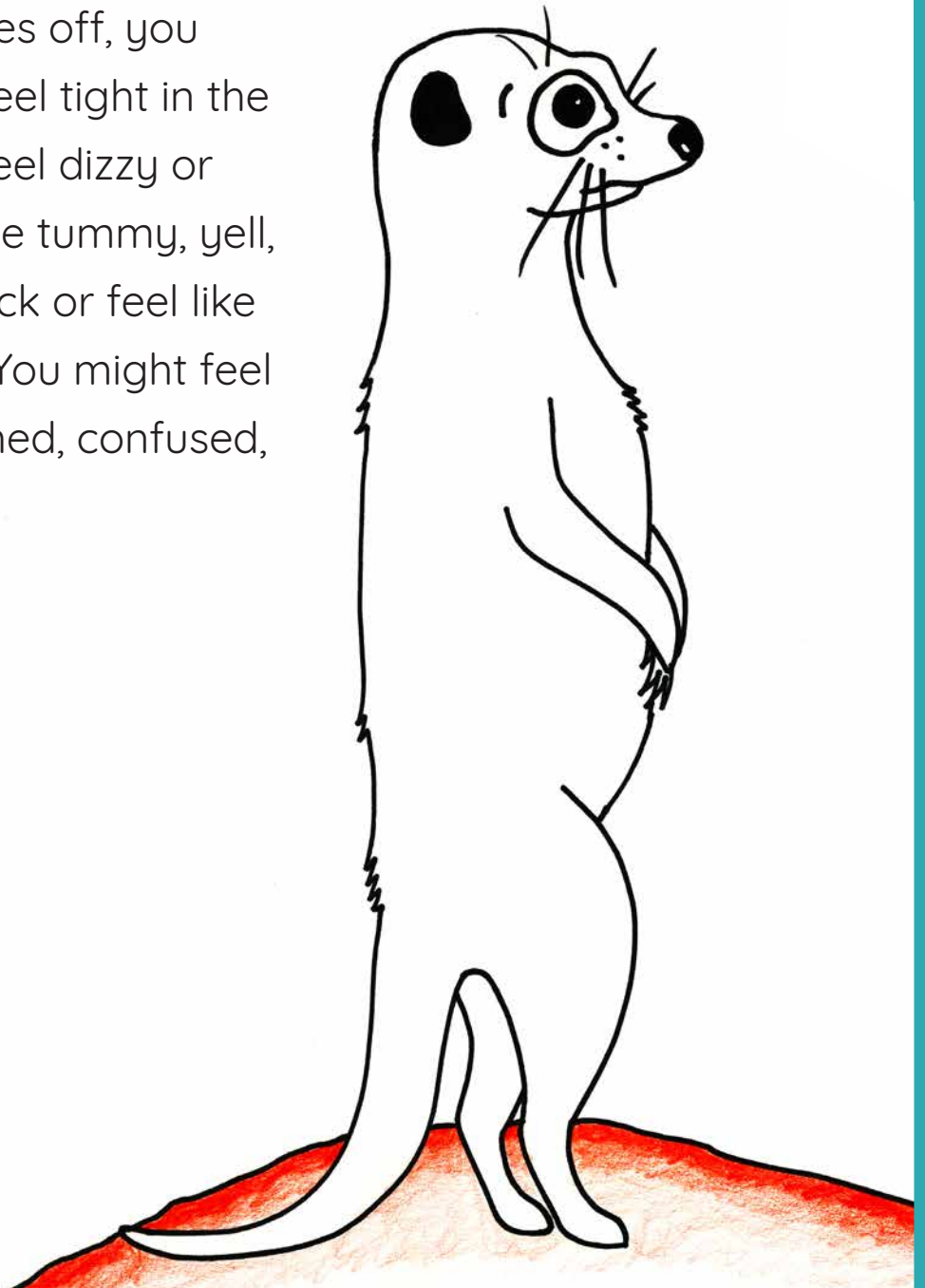


Like if there was a dinosaur in
your playground!

But sometimes he sounds the alarm
when there really isn't any danger.

Like when we're worried, too excited or
too tired. Or, if in the past you have been
frightened a lot or hurt or abused.

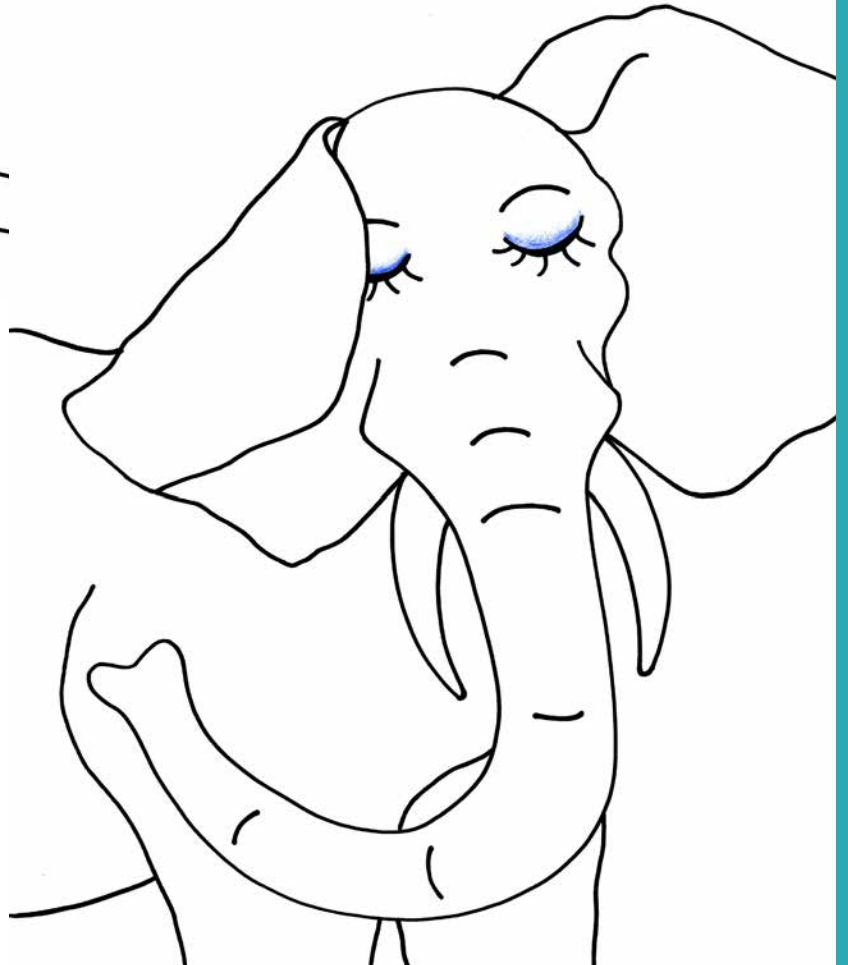
When the alarm goes off, you might breath fast, feel tight in the chest, get sweaty, feel dizzy or numb, feel sick in the tummy, yell, want to stomp or kick or feel like running away fast. You might feel panicky, overwhelmed, confused, tired, angry or hurt.



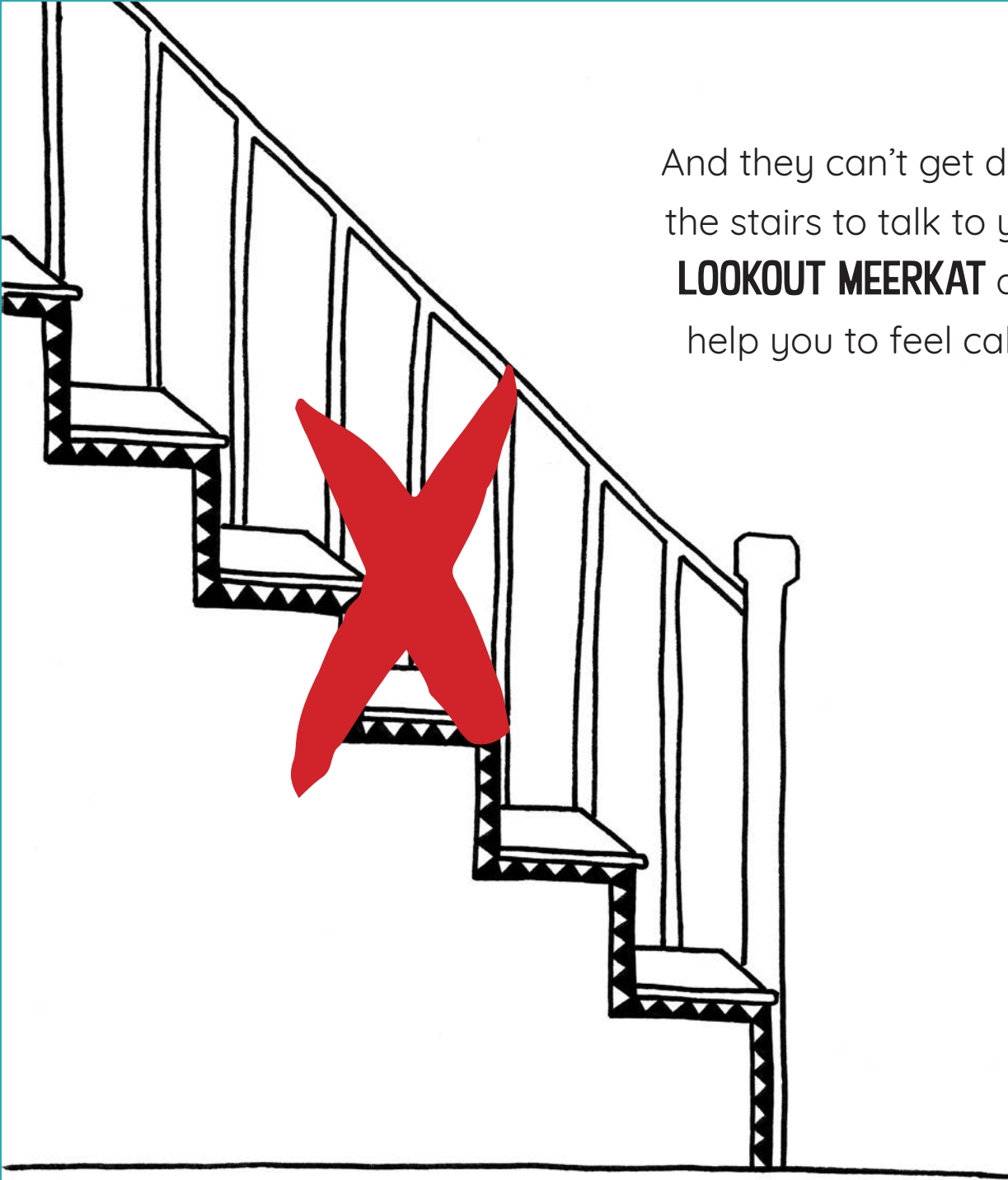


When your alarm goes off, your **WISE OWL** goes to sleep and you might have trouble thinking.

Your **LISTENING ELEPHANT** closes her ears and you might have trouble remembering helpful things to do.



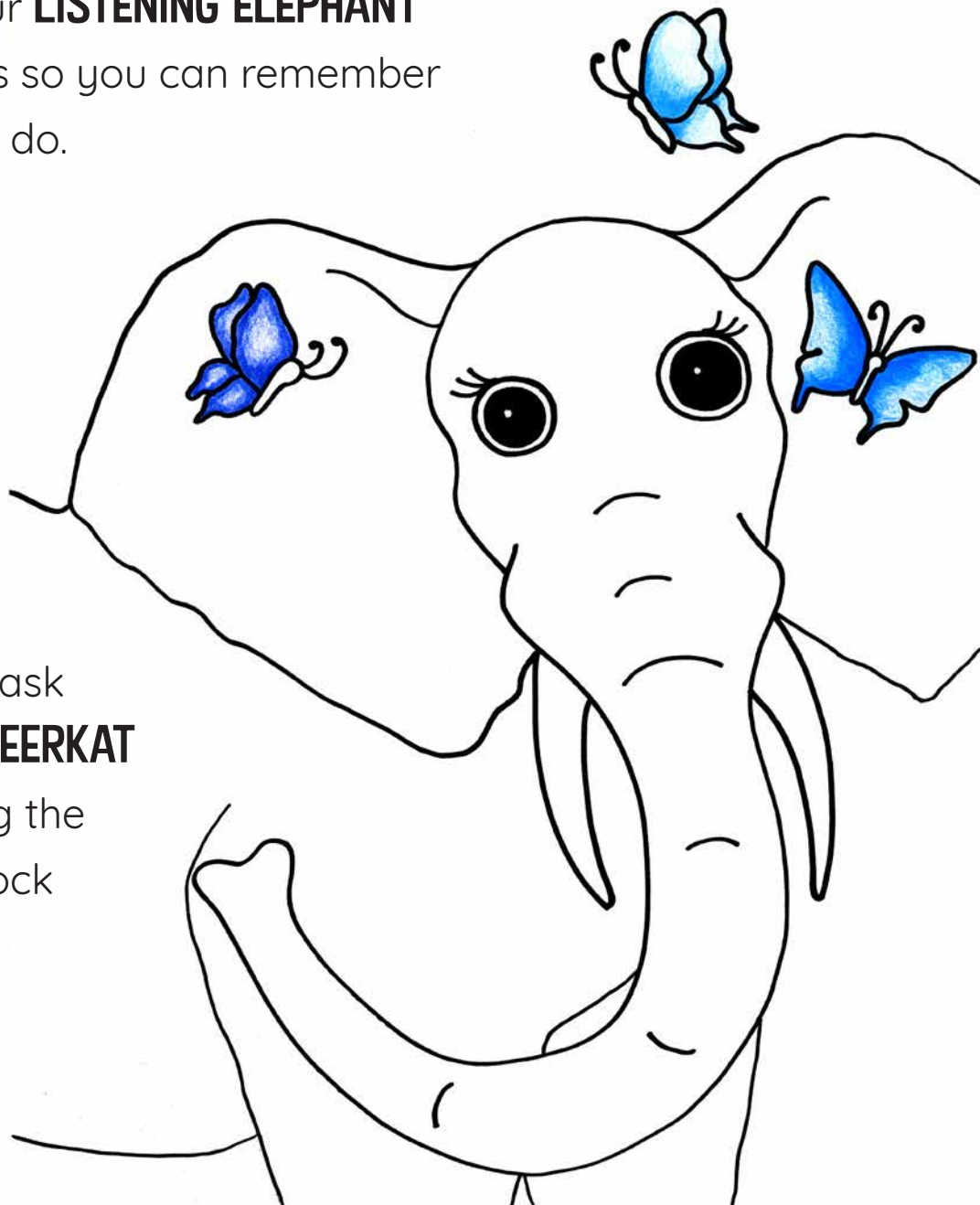
And they can't get down
the stairs to talk to your
LOOKOUT MEERKAT and
help you to feel calm.



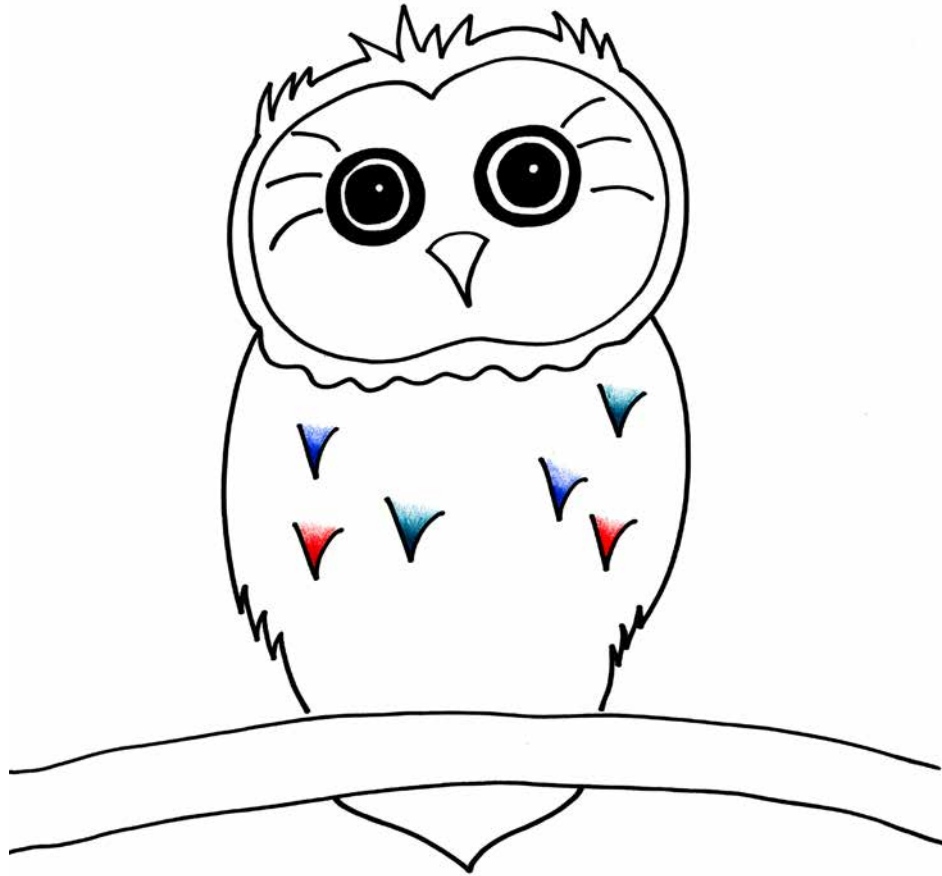


We need to wake up
your **WiSE OWL** so you
can think again.

She can ask your **LISTENING ELEPHANT**
to open her ears so you can remember
helpful things to do.



They can go
downstairs and ask
your **LOOKOUT MEERKAT**
to stop sounding the
alarm and unblock
the stairs.



You can wake up **WISE OWL** by asking an adult you know and trust to help you to do some things to feel calm again.

WHAT CALMING ACTIVITIES WORK FOR YOU?

Here are some examples you can try:

- Breathe to calm down: slowly breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth. Breathe in for a count of 4, hold for a count of 4, breath out for a count of 4, pause for a count of 4. Then repeat a few times.
- Mindfulness activity: lie down in a quiet place, put a soft toy on your tummy and use your breathing to rock the toy to sleep.
- Calming activity: with a safe adult, walk together slowly and purposefully, feeling the sensations in your feet and legs with each step.
- If your body feels too busy to do any of these try bouncing on a trampoline or dancing to fun music or running on the spot.

INFORMATION FOR PARENTS, GUARDIANS, CARERS AND SUPPORTERS

What is primary trauma?

Primary trauma is an event or situation that is experienced as threatening to one's life and overwhelms the ability to cope with the intense negative feelings experienced at the time.

What is complex childhood trauma?

Complex childhood trauma can occur when children suffer from repeated relational trauma such as physical, emotional or sexual abuse; neglect; and family or interpersonal violence. Complex trauma refers to the cumulative effects of repeated traumas during a child's development.

What is the fight, flight or freeze response?

Research shows that people faced with extreme danger react physically with changes in their hormones, blood flow, muscles, heart, bladder, gastrointestinal tract, eyes, skin and other part of the body.

These changes make up the fight, flight, freeze response. This response primes the body to fight off an aggressor, to run away or to become immobile and block out painful feelings and thoughts.

When faced with trauma, children feel intensely frightened, vulnerable, helpless and confused. Their bodies react physically with the fight, flight, freeze response .

What are the effects of complex childhood trauma?

Complex childhood trauma means that a child can 'overuse' their fight, flight, freeze response. The chemicals released during this response can accumulate – causing toxic stress.

What is toxic stress?

Toxic stress is the cumulative effects of fight, flight, freeze chemicals on the child's developing nervous and stress response system. This system can become set permanently on high alert.

ABOUT THIS BOOK

This book is designed to enable young children to explore and name brain parts and functions and understand how complex trauma may have affected the development of their nervous system including their brain and stress responses.

It can be useful for children to recognise and name these reactions to understand more of how they feel and react to situations.

It can be helpful for children to know that there is a reason why they act and feel the way they do. If a child knows there is a reason why they react the way they do, this can lead to opportunities to discuss coping and calming strategies which, when practiced on a regular basis, can help reduce the effects of toxic stress.

Your Brilliant Brain Book requires a parent, carer or supporter to be informed and sensitive to the child and to have some understanding of complex childhood trauma and toxic stress.

Please consult a trained counsellor if you require further assistance to address this topic with your child.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

While reading to the child

The text can be read with time for reflection between text, images or pages.

The adult can use prompt questions to reinforce the material such as:

- What characteristics do these animals have?
- What are the animals doing? Is this familiar/remind you of anyone else?
- How are the animals coping?
- How could the animals work better together?

After reading to the child

To assist with the child's understanding and enable them to retain information, the adult might ask the child prompt questions such as:

- Do you ever feel like any of the characters/animals? (Encourage the child to talk compassionately and calmly to their Lookout Meerkat)
- When you feel this way what do you do?
- Have you ever tried the breathing or mindfulness activities? What were they like?
- Would you like to practice an activity now? Which activity would you like to choose?
- Where can you go for help/support when you feel the alarm going off?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Belinda Thomson is a Social Worker with over 25 years experience working with children, young people and families effected by abuse and neglect. She has worked for the past 15 years as Professional Development Coordinator for Evolve Therapeutic Services (Sunshine Coast team) which is a mental health service for children and young people in the child protection system in Queensland Australia. For any inquiries email: belinda.thomson@health.qld.gov.au

ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

Natasha Chow is a Early Childhood Teacher with 12 years experience working in early years education. She has a passion for all things creative, including assisting children to be naturally creative with her business BitsBox. She can be contacted via natashaechow@gmail.com

Children who have been exposed to abuse and neglect often suffer the detrimental effects of complex trauma including toxic stress.

This book is intended to help a child explore and understand complex childhood trauma and toxic stress, how it might affect them and talk about and practice strategies that can help.

