The Picnic That Answered Back

A little story about trying a different way

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Ages 4–6





Capybara knocked twice on the picnic table. “Knock-knock.” From across the table, Aro answered, “Knock-knock.” Capybara tried a hum. “Mmm-mmm.” “Mmm-mmm,” Aro hummed back. She tucked her paws against her tummy. “That's it! I want a picnic that answers back. An echo picnic!”



Now, an echo picnic was her own invention. The table was still a table, and the river was still a river. But whatever Capybara did, Aro could answer. A tap for a tap. A hum for a hum. I think you would have liked her invitation. You didn't need a ticket. You needed someone to answer. From beneath Capybara's paws came a tiny “grr.” She hummed a little louder. There. Her invitation was ready.



Aro set down his leaf-lined basket. It held two fruits. “I'll bring the echo,” he said.
“What will you bring?” Capybara leaned over the three baskets waiting beside her.
“A fruit echo! A basket with the same number as yours. Then we can begin.”



Capybara chose the widest basket. Its handle made a comfortable creak as she carried it over. Surely such a roomy basket would make a fine echo. She touched Aro's first fruit, then the fruit in her chosen basket. “One for you. One for me.” But when she touched Aro's second fruit, her paw found only a leaf in her own basket.



She lifted the leaf. No fruit underneath. “Mine has one,” she said. “Yours has two. My basket is wide, but it has fewer.” Her picnic hum stopped halfway out. Aro kept her place on the mat. Capybara returned the whole basket to the table. She hadn't taken out its fruit. She could still choose again.



Because the wide basket had held too little, Capybara tried a basket with fruit right up near the rim. She carried it carefully, keeping everything inside. This time, she hurried through the touches. “One-one! Two-two!” Her paw landed on another fruit in her basket. “Three!” Aro had no third fruit to answer it.



Capybara waited. The extra fruit waited too. It was excellent at waiting. “Three is more than your two,” she said. “That would work for a more picnic. But I wanted an echo picnic.” She set the basket down. Her paws stayed on its handle. “I'm making a waiting picnic.” Aro settled beside her instead of reaching for a basket. “Your spot is still here,” he said.



Capybara loosened her paws. First she had chosen by the basket's size. Then she had rushed. Neither way had given her the fruit echo she wanted. This time she left the baskets where they were. “A different way. One at a time,” she said.



She touched one fruit in Aro's basket. Then she touched one in the remaining basket. “One for you. One for me.” She stopped before moving on. Both fruits had a partner. “A different way. One at a time.”



Her paw touched Aro's other fruit, then the other fruit in the remaining basket. “Two for you. Two for me.” Capybara checked around the leaves. No fruit had been missed. Neither basket had an extra one. She carried that whole basket to the mat and set it beside Aro's. Two fruits in his. Two in hers. She had found her echo.



Capybara knocked twice on the table. “Knock-knock.” “Knock-knock,” Aro answered. This time her hum came all the way out. “Mmm-mmm.” “Mmm-mmm.” Then something underneath Capybara's paws went, “Grrrrr.”



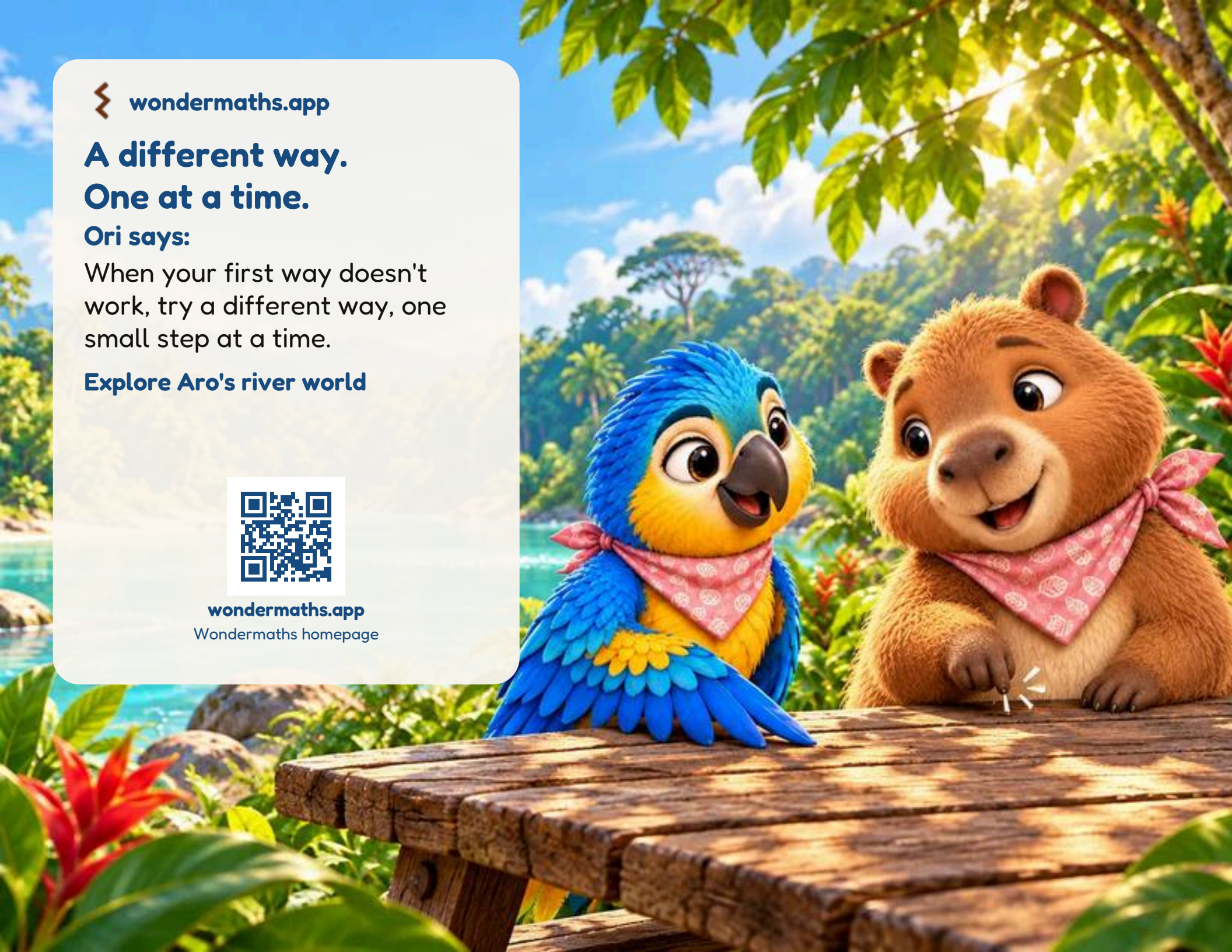
She bent down to listen. It wasn't a basket. It was her tummy. Aro leaned toward his own tummy. Nothing happened. “Mine hasn't learned that answer,” he said. Capybara laughed, and the hum turned into a laugh with her. “That one's just the lunch bell.”



They settled together on the mat. Capybara rested her paws beside the basket she had chosen. There was room for her friend, room for their lunch, and room for a little quiet between the answers. “A different way. One at a time,” she said softly. “I didn't need a bigger basket. I needed to try a different way.”



Before they began to eat, she gave the table one tiny tap. Aro answered with one tiny tap of his own. The picnic had begun. And here is something to carry with you, little one: when your first way doesn't work, try a different way, one small step at a time.



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A different way. One at a time.

Ori says:

When your first way doesn't work, try a different way, one small step at a time.

Explore Aro's river world

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