

POLDI

**By
Marge Huneke Blaine**



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For my grandchildren

**Nick, Alex and Chris
Laura and Mia
Michelle and Meagan**

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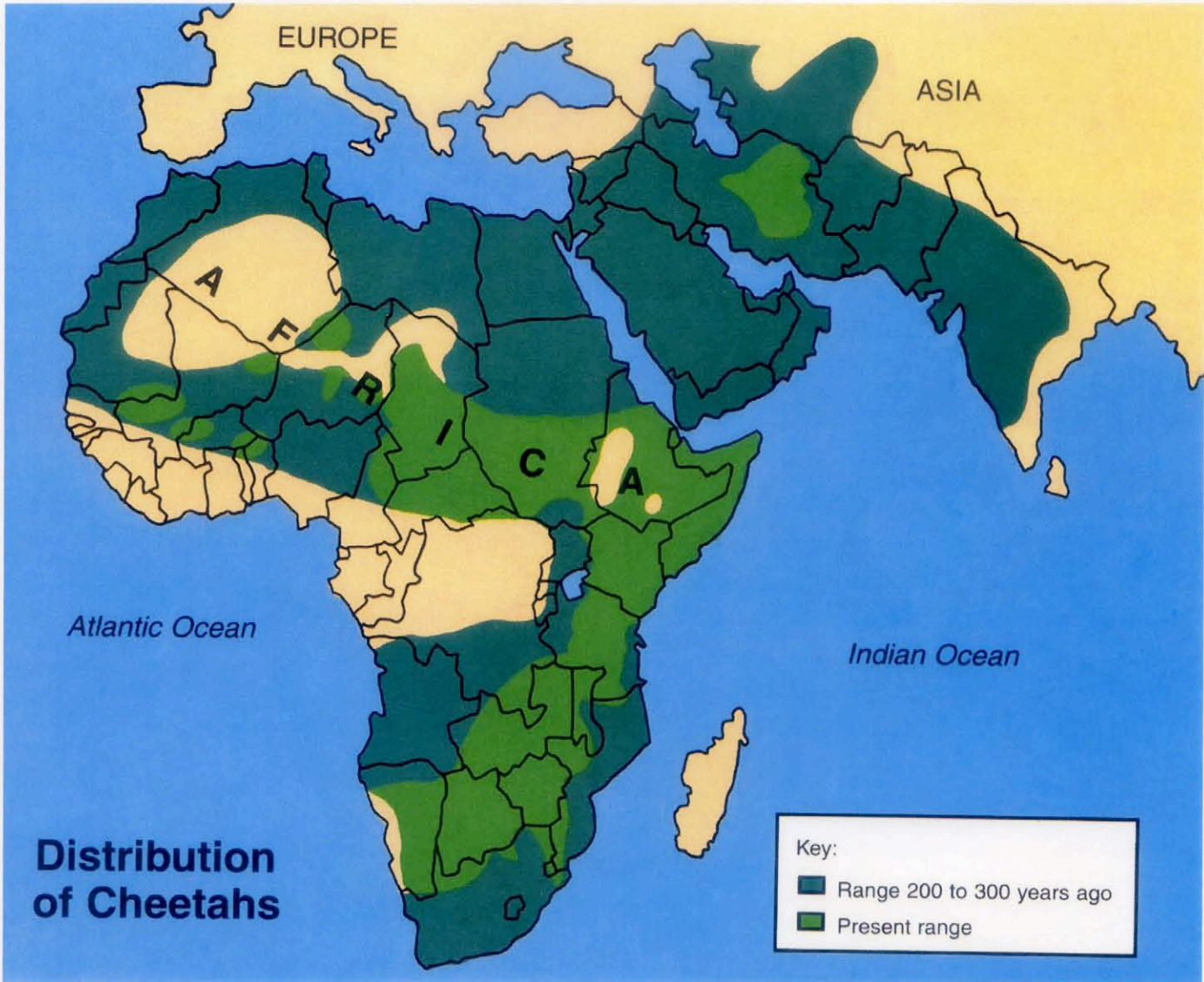
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To my dear grandchildren

Terry's wonderful pictures and my two visits to East Africa made me want to tell you a story about cheetahs. I think cheetahs are the nicest wild animals in Africa. They are excellent mothers and they don't attack humans – two very endearing qualities.

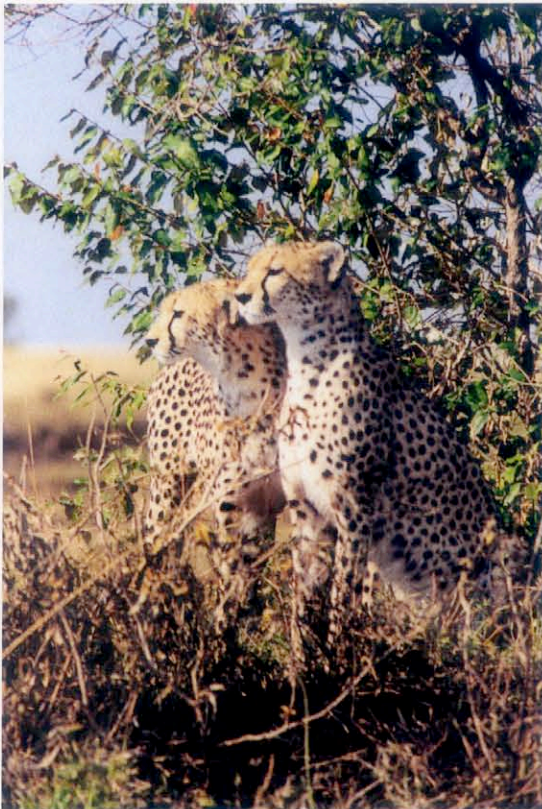
I'm grateful for the photos taken by your Grandpa Terry and our friend, Karen Conlon. I'm also grateful for the wonderful published books with the photographs that are credited below.

**Love
Grandma/Mahgie**



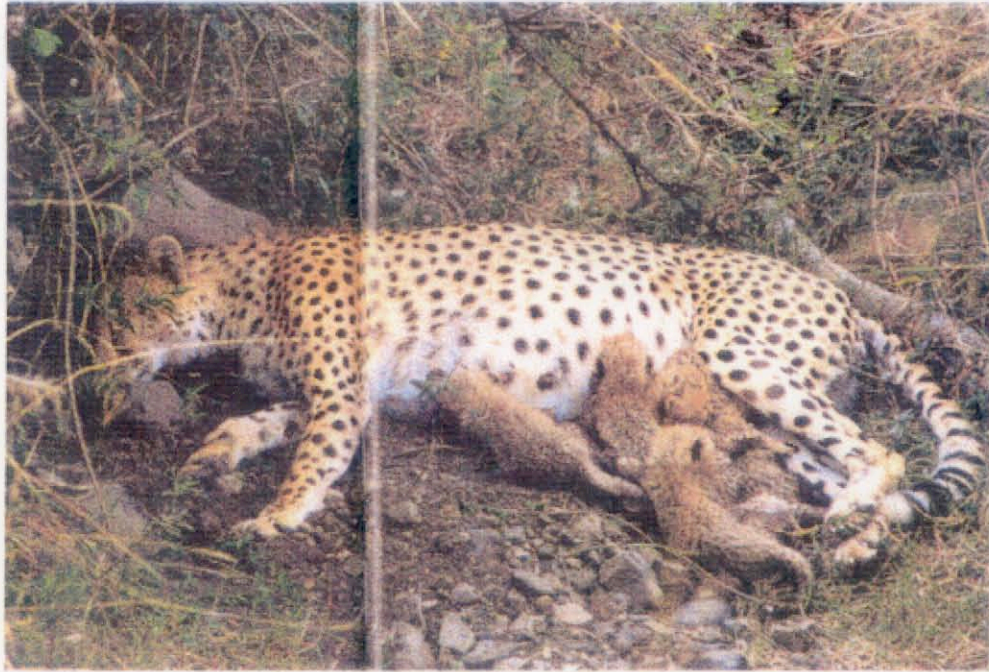
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Serafina was a young female cheetah who lived in the savanna of East Africa, in a country called Tanzania. It was a flat, grassy area with a hot, dry climate. She was smaller than the lion and leopard, but at 120 pounds, she was much bigger than a house cat. Her coat was light tan with black spots and her belly was white. On her tail the spots came together to form four rings and ended in a bushy white tuft. Her face was different than that of other spotted cats because of the long black stripes called tear lines, which ran from the inside corner of each eye down to the outside of her mouth.



A few months ago, Serafina had mated with Big Mike, a dominant male. He was a large and handsome cheetah, who was a successful lone male in the area. Male cheetahs mark their territory by spraying urine on rocks or trees. That smell tells other males cheetahs to stay out.

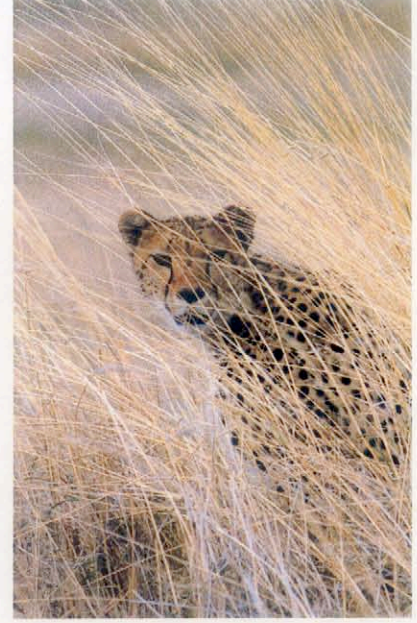
During the time that Serafina was able to mate, Big Mike stayed with her for about a week. After they mated he left, but he was never too far away. He always watched from a distance.



About three months later, Serafina knew her time had come. She searched for a secret place in the shrub growth of the savanna and hollowed out a nest in the dry dirt with her paws. Four cubs were born – three males and a female. Their names were Rudy, Gus, Carlie and Poldi.

The cubs had the same color and markings as their mother – except that their bodies were covered with a layer of long, smoke-gray fur, like the fluff on a baby bird. It was even longer on their shoulders and down their backs. They would lose this gray fur when they were about three months old. Then their coats would be golden like Serafina's. In a few weeks the cubs were old enough to venture out of the nest and take a look at their world.





As the cubs began to explore their world they saw other animals around them. There was the lion who eyed the cubs hungrily, wondering if he could kill one of them. He knew Serafina was a fierce protector and he would not have a successful kill unless she went away. A leopard watched from a tree, wondering if he had a chance at a kill. But he saw Serafina, and decided not to risk it. But the most dangerous was a male cheetah called Egon, the Evil Elder. He always stayed out of sight, but he watched Serafina and her four cubs, waiting for an opportunity to take and kill one or more of them. It would be an easy meal for him – except for Serafina.





As the cubs grew they ventured farther away from their mother. Poldi was the most daring. Each day she wandered a little farther from the well hidden nest.

Poldi taunted her brothers, who were more timid. "Come follow me. See what I can do", she would tease. But they were more cautious and stayed close to Serafina whenever they could.





The cubs grew bigger and their demands for food forced Serafina to hunt more often. She had to go farther away from them. She licked the cubs with her rough tongue and told them “Stay here. Stay hidden. Stay quiet!”

She moved away from them through tall grass. Her large chest and thigh muscles supported long thin legs. Her feet were thin too, not rounded like other cats’ feet. Her small round ears were low on her head and her hearing was very keen. When she heard her prey she didn’t have to turn her head to search for it. She just moved her ears to find out where the sound came from. The two lines down her face were good camouflage when she hid in the grass. They helped her get very close to her prey without being seen.

She began a careful stalk. When she was close enough to a small antelope she began the chase. Her incredible speed brought a swift successful end to the hunt. Her cubs would have food today.

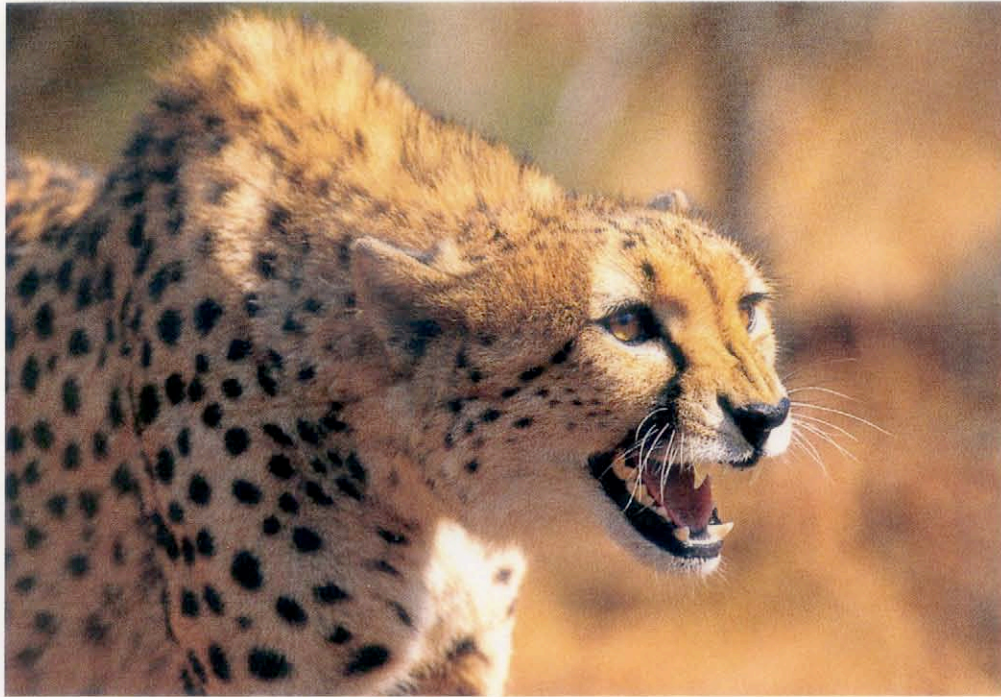




As she rested, guarding her kill, she heard a cry from one of her cubs. It was Poldi and she was in danger!

Poldi had been willful and disobedient. She had tried to follow Serafina so she could watch her hunt. As she tried to find her mother she was watched by Egon the Evil Elder. He snarled to himself. “Now she is alone. Her mother is away hunting. This is my opportunity to kill the little one who dares to wander away alone. I’ll have a tasty meal for myself.”





As he approached Poldi he did not see Serafina racing toward him. His sharp ears heard her first and he whirled to face her. She snarled, her mouth wide, with sharp fangs showing. The hair on her neck and shoulders was raised and she stamped her two front feet as she prepared to lunge at him. He backed off, choosing not to face her rage.

As he crept off through the bush he thought to himself, “Another day....another day...you watch out, little Poldi. You’re too daring. I’ll get you another day”.

Serafina scolded Poldi for her disobedience. But relief overcame her anger. She was grateful that she had arrived in time. She led Poldi back to the antelope she had killed but they were too late. Jackals and vultures had already eaten part of the animal. Serafina drove them away and began to drag the remains back to her three cubs. Poldi was content to let her mother haul the heavy animal.

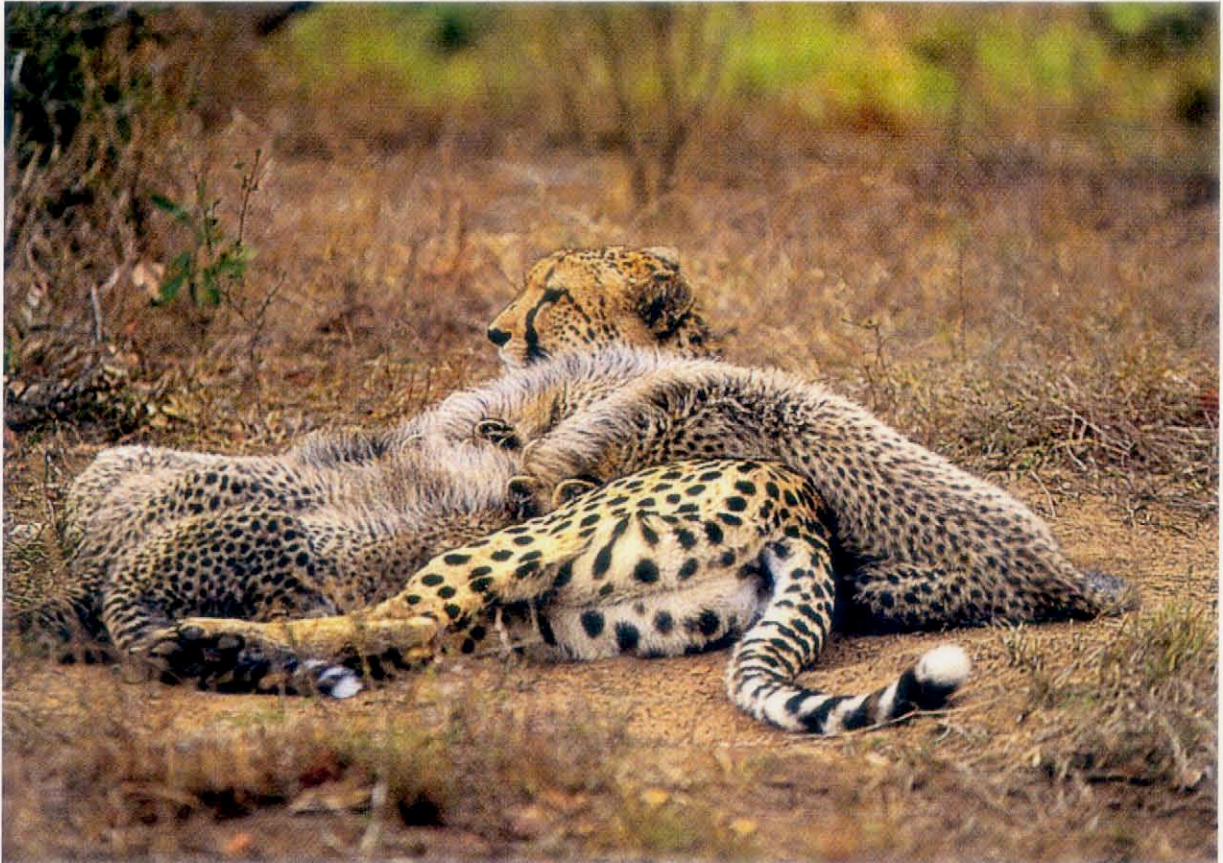




When they were nearly back to the other cubs Poldi jumped ahead of her mother. “I can do it mother. Let me drag the meat for you”. Poldi proudly dragged the meat the last few feet to the brush where her brothers were waiting. She proudly announced “I’ve brought back dinner for you. I helped mother make the kill”. They looked at Serafina. Was this true? But she said nothing. Though she had scolded Poldi for straying away from the nest, it would soon be time for her cubs to learn to hunt for themselves.

“Mother, why are cheetahs the fastest runners of all animals?” The cubs had snuggled close to Serafina after their bellies were full.



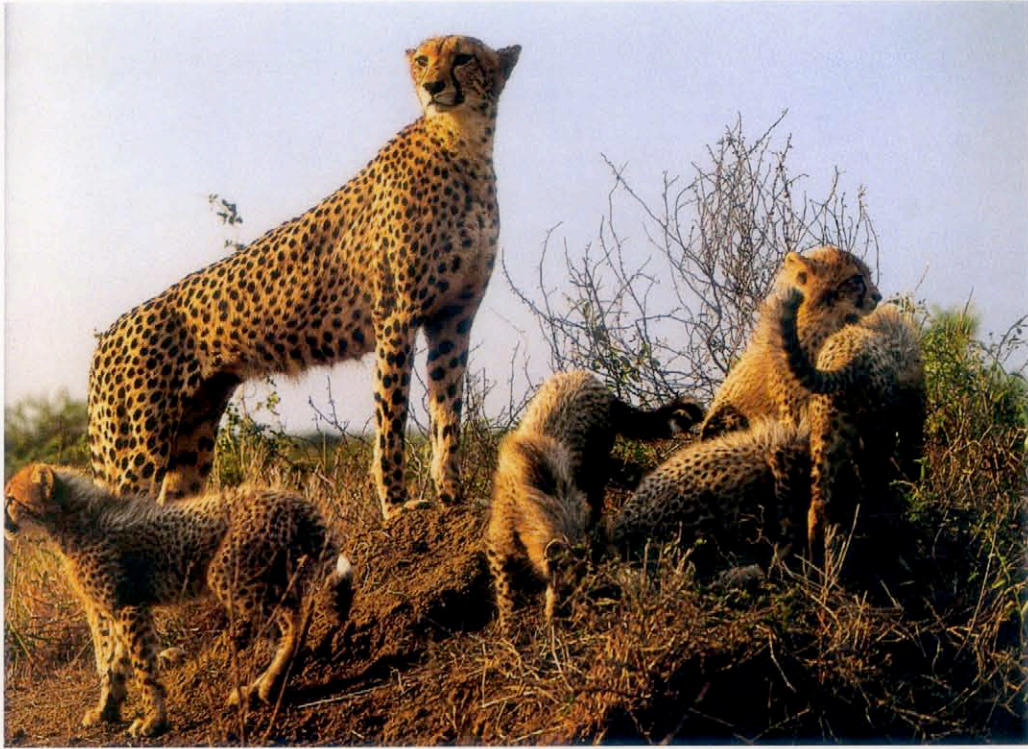


Serafina purred in contentment. “The Africans tell a story”, she began. “The Creator decided to find out which of His animals could run the fastest. He entered the cheetah in a race with the tsessebe, which is the swiftest of all the antelopes. The cheetah had soft paws then, and he realized they were not suited for real speed. So he borrowed a set of paws from an obliging wild dog. The race started from a high baobab tree. The Creator Himself was in charge, and the two contestants were told to run right across the plains to a hill on the far side. The animals lined up, and then – go! They leapt away.

The tsessebe soon took the lead, and by half-way, he was so far ahead he seemed sure to win. But suddenly – disaster! Tsessebe stumbled on a stone and crashed to the ground; he had broken his leg.

The good natured cheetah, instead of running past and winning the race, stopped to help his opponent.

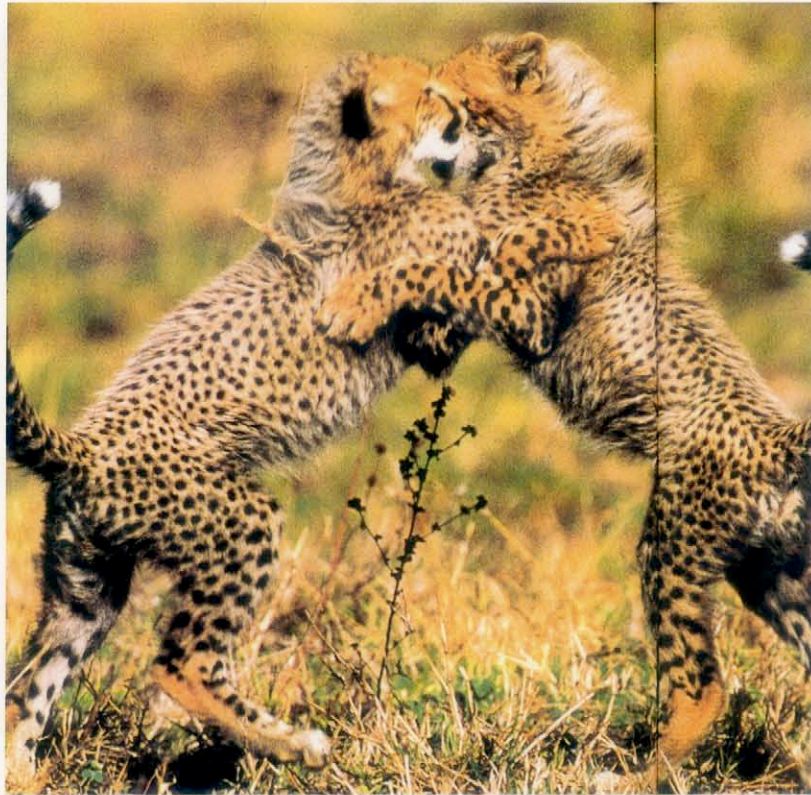
The Creator, seeing this, was so pleased by the cheetah’s unselfish act that He bestowed upon the cheetah a gift. He made him the fastest animal in the land; and what’s more, allowed him to keep the paws of the wild dog.”



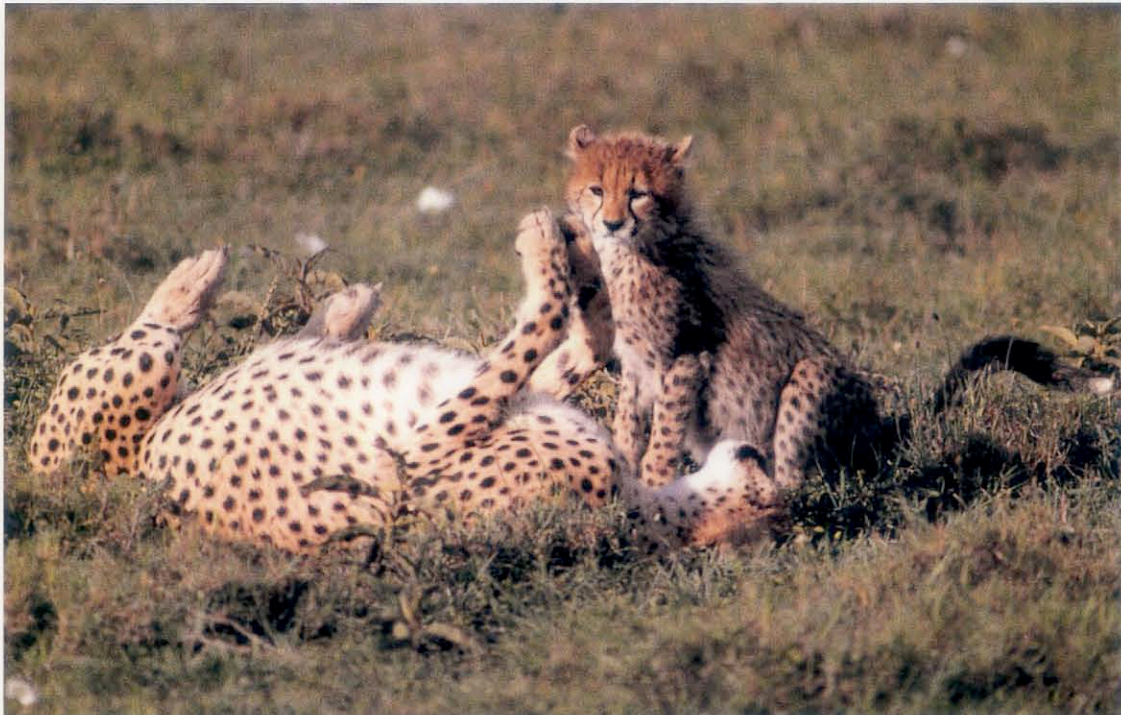
Poldi began to lead her cubs farther from the nest where they had been hidden. Each day they watched for prey with her. They were constantly investigating their world, but they were poor at spotting danger. It was always Serafina's responsibility to be on the lookout for danger.



Poldi often tried to persuade Carlie, her favorite brother, to play with her instead of paying attention while Serafina was teaching them to watch for likely prey.



The cubs spent much of their time playing with each other and with their mother. They made cheetah sounds to each other, yelps and squeals, as they tumbled about in the grass. Sometimes they hid in the shrub and yipped at each other. They rolled over and over each other in the grass. They took turns hiding and pouncing.





But their favorite times were after a morning's hunt and play. They would snuggle up close to Serafina. "Mother – tell us again. Why are our cheeks stained with tears?" Serafina would smile and repeat the old legend. "Long ago a wicked and lazy hunter watched some antelope grazing. He was hungry but too lazy to hunt. Suddenly he saw a female cheetah stalking the herd through the bush. She kept downwind and slowly moved closer. The hunter watched, fascinated, as she crept closer to an unwise antelope that had strayed from the herd. Suddenly, the cheetah gathered her long legs under her and sprang forward like an arrow. With dazzling speed she chased down and caught the antelope just as it leapt away. Panting, the cheetah dragged her prize to the shade where her three cubs waited for her.

Now the lazy hunter was envious of the cubs and wished that he, also, would have such a good hunter to provide for him. He had a wicked idea. He knew that cheetahs never attacked men, so he planned to steal one of the cubs. He would train it to hunt for him. Later when the mother was gone, he went to take one of the cubs from the hiding place. They were still too small to run away and, being greedy, he decided to take all three, thinking that three would undoubtedly be better than one.

When the mother returned to find her babies gone, her heart was broken, She cried and cried until the tears made dark stains on her cheeks. She wept all night and all the next day. She cried so loudly that she was heard by an old man, who came to see what all the noise was about.

This old man was wise in the ways of the world and he had great knowledge of and respect for animals. When he found out what had happened, he became very angry, for not only had the lazy hunter become a thief, but he had broken the traditions of the tribe. All knew that a hunter must use only his own strength and skill. Any other way of hunting was surely a dishonor.

The old man returned to the village and told the other elders what had happened. The villagers became angry too, and the people found the lazy hunter and drove him away from the village forever.

The old man took the three cheetah cubs and returned them to their grateful mother, but the long weeping of the mother cheetah had stained her face permanently, and so, to this day, say the tribesmen, cheetahs wear the tearstains on their faces, as a reminder to the hunters that it is not honorable to hunt in any other way than that which is traditional.”

The cubs nodded drowsily as Serafina finished the story. Poldi and her three brothers continued to grow as the weeks passed. They stayed with their mother for another year, playing with her and with each other. They learned to hunt and they rested in the shade and listened to her stories each day. Poldi and Carlie remained friends and stayed together for a long time. Carlie sometimes joined his brothers, Rudy and Gus, who grew up and learned to hunt as a team.



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H. Terrence Blaine

Page 5 photo; Page 7, Top left and Top center; Page 10, Bottom Right photo; Page 11, Both bottom photos;

Karen Conlon

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