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During the afternoon rush hour the next day, my dad returned to the same corner with his new sign. It was drizzling again, and gray clouds hung low in the sky. I waited in the car with my mom and Robin and Aretha.

My mom had just gotten off work at Rite Aid. She said two people were out sick, which meant she was the only cashier. People in line were grumpy, she

said. Why didn't they just read the *Enquirer* and wait their turns?

A driver in a red SUV rolled down his window. He smiled and said something to my dad. They both nodded. My dad tucked the sign under his arm and held out his hands till they were about two feet apart.

"I'll bet Dad's telling him about that trout at the lake," I said to my mom.

She smiled. "And exaggerating."

"Is that the same as lying?" I asked.

"Not when it's fish-related," said my mom.

When the light changed, the driver handed my dad money and waved as he pulled away. After about an hour, he'd collected a bunch of dollar bills. Also a big cup of coffee and a sack with two slices of lemon pound cake in it.

My sign was a soggy mess.

My mom flattened the bills on her lap. "Fifty-six dollars," she announced.

"And eighty-three cents," my dad added.

My parents shared the coffee. I split the pound

cake with Robin. Then I climbed to the back. Aretha was tail-thumping hopefully.

When no one was looking, I gave her my whole piece.

It was windy and cold, and the rain had come back hard. We listened to the radio as tiny rivers zigged and zagged down the glass.

A new man went to stand on the corner. His sign said VET—GOD BLESS. A small, poodley-looking dog was nestled in his half-zipped jacket.

“I still think you should take Aretha with you next time, Dad,” I said. “I’ll bet we’ll make even more money.”

He didn’t answer. I figured he was listening to the radio announcer. She was warning that the chance of rain was 80 percent, so it was a good night to stay inside.

A summer-day-camp bus stopped at the light. Its windows were fogged up. I saw some kids and hunched down in case I knew them.

Someone had drawn a smiley face with a word by

it. *Hello!* I decided, but it was hard to tell. I was on the outside, so everything was backward.

Aretha licked my sticky hand.

"Next time," my mom said, leaning her head on my dad's shoulder, "I'll do it."

"No," he answered, so softly I almost couldn't hear him. "No, you won't."

The next evening, Crenshaw appeared. All of him.
Not just his tail.

We were at a rest stop off Highway 101, sitting at a picnic table.

“Cheetos and water for dinner,” my mom said. She sighed. “I am a bad, bad mother.”

“Not a lot of options at a vending machine on the 101,” my dad said. He had hung a pair of his underwear on a nearby bush to dry. Sometimes we washed

our clothes in the sinks at bathrooms. I tried not to look at the underwear.

After we ate, I headed to a patch of grass under a pine tree. I lay down and stared at the darkening sky. I could see my parents, and they could see me, but at least I felt like I was a little bit on my own.

I loved my family. But I was also tired of my family. I was tired of being hungry. I was tired of sleeping in a box.

I missed my bed. I missed my books and Legos. I even missed my bathtub.

Those were the facts.

A gentle breeze set the grass dancing. The stars spun.

I heard the sound of wheels on gravel and sat up on my elbows. I recognized the tail first.

"Meow," said the cat.

"Meow," I said back, because it seemed polite.

28

We lived in our minivan for fourteen weeks.

Some days we drove from place to place. Some days we just parked and sat. We weren't going anywhere. We just knew we weren't going home.

I guess getting *out* of homelessness doesn't happen all at once, either.

We were lucky. Some people live in their cars for years.

I'm not looking on the bright side. It was pretty scary. And stinky.

But my parents took care of us the best they could.

After a month, my dad got a part-time job at a hardware store. My mom picked up some extra waitressing shifts, and my dad kept singing for tips. Every time his fishing sign got wet, I made him a new one. Slowly they started saving money, bit by bit, to pay for a rental deposit on an apartment.

It was sort of like getting over a cold. Sometimes you feel like you'll never stop coughing. Other times you're sure tomorrow is the day you'll definitely be well.

When they finally put together enough money, my parents moved us to Swanlake Village. It was about forty miles from our old house, which meant I had to start at a new school. I didn't care at all. At least I was going back to school. A place where facts mattered and things made sense.

Instead of a house, we moved into a small,

PART TWO

tired-looking apartment. It seemed like a palace to us. A place where you could be warm and dry and safe.

I started school late, but eventually I made new friends. I never told them about the time we were homeless. Not even Marisol. I just couldn't.

If I never talked about it, I felt like it couldn't ever happen again.



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Crenshaw and I didn't chat much during those weeks on the road. There was always someone around to interrupt us. But that was okay. I knew he was there and that was enough.

Sometimes that's all you really need from a friend.

When I think about that time, what I remember most of all is *Crenshaw*, riding on top of our minivan. I'd stare out the window at the world blurring

past, and every so often I'd catch a glimpse of his tail, riding the wind like the end of a kite.

I'd feel hopeful then, for a while at least, that things would get better, that maybe, just maybe, anything was possible.

30

I guess for most kids, imaginary friends just sort of fade away, the way dreams do. I've asked people when their imaginary friends stopped hanging around, and they never seem to remember.

Everybody said the same thing: I guess I just outgrew him.

But I lost Crenshaw all of a sudden, after things got back to normal. It was like when you have a

favorite T-shirt that you've worn forever. One day you put it on, and surprise: Your belly button is showing. You don't remember growing too big for your shirt, but sure enough, there's your belly button, sticking out for the whole wide world to see.

The day he left, Crenshaw walked to school with me. He did that most mornings unless he wanted to stay home and watch *Blue's Clues* reruns. We stopped at the playground. I was telling him about how I wanted to get a real cat someday.

That was before I found out my parents are extremely allergic to cats.

Crenshaw stood on his head. Then he did a cartwheel. He was an excellent cartwheeler.

When he came to a stop, he gave me a grumpy look. "*I'm* a cat," he said.

"I know," I said.

"I'm a *real* cat." His tail whipped up and down.

"I mean," I said, "you know—a cat other people can see."

He batted a paw at a yellow butterfly. I could tell he was ignoring me.

A bunch of big guys, fourth and fifth graders, walked by. They pointed at me and laughed, making cuckoo circles with their fingers.

“Who you talking to, doofus?” one asked, and then he snort-laughed.

That is my least favorite kind of laughing.

I pretended not to hear him. I knelt down and tied my shoe like it was a very important thing I had to do.

My face was hot. My eyes were wet. I’d never been embarrassed about having an imaginary friend until that moment.

I waited. The boys moved on. Then I heard someone else approaching. She wasn’t walking. More like skip-dancing.

“Hey, I’m Marisol,” said the girl. I’d seen her at recess before. She had long, dark, crazy hair and an unusually large smile. “I have a Tyrannosaurus backpack just like yours. I’m going to be a paleontologist when I grow up, which means—”

“I know what it means,” I said. “I want to be one too. Or maybe a bat scientist.”

Her smile got even bigger.

“I’m Jackson,” I said, and I stood.

When I looked around me, I realized that Crenshaw had vanished.

31

I've sometimes wondered if I was kind of old to have an imaginary friend. Crenshaw didn't even show up in my life until the end of first grade.

So one day at the library, I looked it up. Turns out somebody did a study on children and their imaginary friends. Fact is, 31 percent of them had an imaginary friend at age six or seven, even more than three- and four-year-olds.

Maybe I wasn't so old after all.

In any case, Crenshaw had excellent timing. He came into my life just when I needed him to.

It was a good time to have a friend, even if he was imaginary.

PART THREE

The world is so you have something to stand on

—A HOLE IS TO DIG:

A FIRST BOOK OF FIRST DEFINITIONS,

written by Ruth Krauss and

illustrated by Maurice Sendak

32

It occurred to me that Crenshaw's return—the night of the kitty bubble bath, as I came to think of it—might be a sign that I was right about my parents. It was coming again—the moving, the craziness. Maybe even the homelessness.

I told myself I'd just have to face facts and make the best of it. It wouldn't be the first time we'd hit a rough spot.

Still and all. I'd been hoping to get Ms. Leach for fifth grade. Everybody said she liked to explode stuff

for science experiments. And Marisol and I had our dog-walking business going pretty well. And I'd been looking forward to trying out the new skate park when they got it built in January. And maybe even doing rec soccer, if we could come up with the money for a uniform.

It would be easier for Robin. You could move her anywhere and she'd be fine. She made friends in an instant. She didn't have to worry about real stuff.

She was still a kid.

I lay on my mattress as the list of things I was going to miss kept getting longer. I told my brain to take a time-out. Sometimes that actually works.

Not so much, this round.

Last year, my principal told me I was an "old soul." I asked what that meant, and he said I seemed wise beyond my years. He said it was a compliment. That he liked the way I always knew when someone needed help with fractions. Or the way I emptied the pencil sharpener without being asked.

That's the way I am at home, too. Most of the

time, anyway. Sometimes I feel like the most grown-up one in the house. Which is why it seemed like my parents should have known they could talk to me about grown-up stuff.

And why it seemed like they should tell me the truth about moving.

Last fall a big raccoon got into our apartment through an open window. It was two in the morning. Aretha barked like a maniac and we all ran to see what was wrong.

The raccoon was in the kitchen, examining a piece of Aretha's dog chow. He held it in his little hands proudly, like he'd discovered a big brown diamond. He was not even a tiny bit afraid of us.

He nibbled his diamond carefully. He seemed glad we'd joined him for dinner.

Aretha leaped onto the couch. She was barking so loud I thought my ears would fall off.

Robin ran to get her baby buggy in case the raccoon wanted to go for a ride. My mom called 911 to report a home invasion.

My dad, who only had on his sock monkey pajama bottoms, turned on his electric guitar and made this earsplitting screechy sound to scare off the raccoon.

“Don’t you dare go near that animal,” my mom warned Robin. She pointed to her cell phone and shushed us. “Yes, Officer, yes. 68 Quiet Moon. Apartment 132. No, he’s not attacking anyone. He’s eating dog food. Dog chow, actually. Not the wet kind. Kids, stay away. He could be rabid.”

“He’s not a rabbit, Mommy,” Robin said as she wheeled her baby buggy in circles around the living room. “I’m pretty sure he’s a beaver.”

For a while I just watched them all go crazy. It was kind of entertaining.

Finally I whistled.

I have a really good whistle for a kid. I use my pinkie fingers.

Everyone stopped and stared. Even the raccoon.

“Guys, just sit on the couch,” I said. “I’ve got this.”

I walked to the front door and opened it.

That's all I did. Just opened it.

Fog drifted. Frogs chatted. The waiting world was calm.

Everyone sat on the couch. I kept Aretha quiet with her squirrel chew toy. It was covered with dog slobber.

We watched the raccoon finish his food. When he was done, he waddled past us like he owned the place and headed for the open door. He glanced over his shoulder before he left. I could almost hear him muttering *Next time I go to a different place. This family is nuts.*

Lately, I felt like I always had to be on alert for the next raccoon invasion.



Saturday morning, I woke up, went into the living room, and found a big empty spot where our TV had been. The room looked naked without it.

My dad was making breakfast. Pancakes and bacon. We hadn't had pancakes and bacon in a really long time.

Robin was sitting at the kitchen table. Aretha was drooling, and Robin's chin was gooey with syrup. "Daddy made my pancakes shaped like Rs. For Robin."

"Do you have a letter preference?" my dad asked me.

He was using his cane, which meant he wasn't feeling great. "You okay?" I asked.

"The cane?" He shrugged. "Just a little insurance policy."

I hugged him. "Plain old circle pancakes would be great," I said. "Where's Mom?"

"Picked up an extra breakfast shift at Toast."

"Daddy sold the TV to Marisol," Robin said. She jutted out her lower lip to make sure we knew she wasn't happy.

"Marisol?" I repeated.

"I saw her dad while I was taking out the trash," my dad said as he poured perfect circles of batter into a pan. "We were talking about the game today, and how his TV had conked out, and one thing led to another. He had the cash, I had the TV, and the rest is history."

"But how are you and I going to watch the game?" I asked.

"We're going to Best Buy it."

I grabbed a strip of bacon. "What's that mean?"

My dad adjusted the heat on the stove. "You'll see. Where there's a will, there's a way."

"Aretha liked watching *Curious George*," said Robin. She set down her plate and Aretha licked it clean.

"You may be interested to hear that Curious George began his existence as a character in a book," said my dad as he flipped a pancake. "In any case, this family needs to spend more quality time together. You know—play cards, maybe. Or Monopoly."

"I like Chutes and Ladders," said Robin.

"Me too." My dad tossed a little chunk of bacon to Aretha. "Too much TV rots your brain."

"You love TV," I said while I started loading the dishwasher.

"That's because TV's already rotted it. There's still hope for you two."

It didn't take long for my breakfast to be ready. "Nice work on the pancakes," I said.

"Thanks. I do have a certain flair." My dad

pointed his spatula at me. "I saw Marisol when Carlos and I were carrying in the TV. She said to remind you about the Gouchers' dachshunds."

"Yeah, we're walking them tomorrow."

"Are dachshunds wiener dogs?" Robin asked.

"Yes, ma'am." My dad nodded. "You know, Jacks, I haven't seen much of Dawan or Ryan or anybody else lately. What's up with that?"

"I dunno. Dawan and Ryan are doing soccer camp. Everybody does different stuff in the summer."

My dad put some dishes in the sink. His back was turned to me. "I'm really sorry about soccer camp, Jacks. Just couldn't swing it."

"No biggie," I said quickly. "I'm kind of growing out of soccer."

"Yeah," my dad said softly. "That happens."

I stared at the sweet steam spinning from my pancakes. I tried hard not to think about Marisol watching our TV, feeling sorry for us while we played Chutes and Ladders and ate bran cereal out of a T-ball cap.

Then I tried not to be annoyed at myself for worrying about something so unimportant.

I grabbed my fork and knife and sliced up my pancakes.

“Whoa,” said my dad. “Ease up, Zorro.”

I looked up, confused. “Who’s Zorro?”

“Masked guy. Good with swords.” My dad pointed to my plate. “You were getting a little carried away with the slice-and-dice action.”

I looked down at my pancakes. It was true. I’d destroyed them pretty well. But that wasn’t what got my attention.

In the middle of the plate, surrounded by maple-syrup mush, were slices of pancake, neatly forming eight letters: *C - R - E - N - S - H - A - W*.

Maybe it was my imagination. Maybe not. In any case, I scarfed them down before anyone could notice.



34

After my mom came home, my dad and I headed for Best Buy. We stopped at the bank, and while my dad stood in line, I grabbed two free suckers, one for me and one for Robin. I always pick purple. If there are no purples, reds are pretty good.

I am not a big fan of yellows.

We were lucky to live in Northern California, I figured. It's really beautiful, except for when there are wildfires or mudslides or earthquakes. Even better,

it's a great place to find free food, if you know where to look. The farmers' market at the Civic Center parking lot is a great spot because they give you samples, things like honey in a straw or peanut brittle. Grocery stores are good too, the ones where they have free cantaloupe pieces on a toothpick. Our local hardware store gives away little bags of popcorn on Saturdays, so that's an option, if you get there early enough.

If you're hungry, you wouldn't want to live in Alaska, I'll bet. They probably don't have outdoor farmers' markets very often. Although in Alaska they do have grizzly bears. I would very much enjoy meeting one of those guys.

From a nice, safe distance. A grizzly bear's front claws can be four inches long.

Around here, it's easier to be hungry in winter than in summer. Most people wouldn't expect that, but during the school year you can get free breakfast and lunch and sometimes after-school snacks. Last year they stopped having summer school because there

wasn't enough money. So that means no breakfast or lunch when school's out.

They do have free food at the community center food pantry, but that's pretty far away. My dad doesn't like to go there. He says he doesn't want to take food from people who really need it. But I think maybe he doesn't like to go because everyone in line looks so tired and sad.

After the bank, we went to Best Buy, which is this giant store filled with TVs and computers and cell phones and things.

There were two long rows of TVs. Some were huge, taller than Robin, and every one of them was set to the same channel. I guess there are a lot of Giants fans working at that store.

When Matt Cain pitched a curveball, twenty balls flew across twenty screens. One TV sky was a deeper blue. One TV field was a softer green. But the movements were all the same. It was like being in a house of mirrors at the county fair.

Lots of people paused to watch the game with us.

The clerks watched too, when they could get away with it. When one of them asked my dad if he had any questions about the TVs, he said we were just looking.

During the fourth inning, something weird happened. Extremely weird. On everybody else's TV, there were two announcers sitting in a booth. They were wearing black headphones, and they were pretty psyched about a triple play.

On my TV there were two announcers sitting in a booth. They had black headphones and they were excited too.

But on my TV, one of the announcers was a cat. A big cat.

"Crenshaw," I said under my breath.

He was looking right at me. He waved his paw.

I looked at my dad's TV. I looked at all the other TVs.

None of their announcers were giant cats.

"Dad." I sort of whisper-gulped the word.

"Did you see that play?" he asked. "Amazing."

"I saw."

I saw something else, too. Crenshaw was holding up two fingers, making rabbit ears behind the other announcer's head.

Weird, I thought, a cat having fingers. I'd forgotten Crenshaw had them.

Weird, I thought, me worrying about *that*.

"You didn't happen to see a cat just now, did you?" I asked in a casual voice.

"Cat?" my dad repeated. "You mean on the field or something?"

"The cat standing on his head," I said. Because that's what Crenshaw was doing. A headstand on the desk. He was good at it too.

My dad grinned. "The cat standing on his head," he repeated. He looked at my TV. "Right."

"Just messing with you," I said. My voice was trembling a little. "I, uh . . . I changed the channel. That new Friskies commercial was on."

My dad ruffled my hair. He looked at me. *Really* looked, in that way only parents can do.

“You feeling okay, buddy?” he asked. “I know things have been a little crazy lately.”

You have no idea, I thought.

I smiled an extra-big fake smile that I use on my parents sometimes. “Totally,” I said.

The Giants won, 6 to 3.

35

When the game was over, we drove to Pet Food Express. All the way there I thought about Crenshaw.

There's always a logical explanation, I told myself.
Always.

Maybe I'd dozed off for a minute and dreamed him up.

Or maybe—just maybe—I was going completely bonkers.

My dad was tired from standing so long at Best

Buy, so I said I'd go get Aretha's dog food. "Smallest, cheapest bag," my dad reminded me.

"Smallest and cheapest." I nodded.

It was cool and quiet inside. I walked past shelf after shelf of dog food. Some contained turkey and cranberries. Some had salmon or tuna or buffalo for dogs who were allergic to chicken. They even had dog food made with kangaroo meat.

Near the food, I saw a rack of dog sweaters. They said things like HOT DOG and I'M A GREAT CATCH. Next to them were sparkly pet collars and harnesses. Aretha would never be caught dead in one of those, I thought. Pets don't care about sparkles. What a waste of money.

I passed a display of dog cookies shaped like bones and cats and squirrels. They looked better than some human cookies. And then, I don't know why, my hand started moving. It grabbed one of those stupid cookies.

The cookie was shaped like a cat.

Next thing I knew, that cookie was in my pocket.

Down the aisle, a clerk in a red vest was on his hands and knees in front of the dog toys. He was wiping up dog pee while a customer's poodle puppy licked his face.

"Collars are half off," the clerk called to me.

I kind of froze. Then I said I was just looking. I wondered if he'd seen me take the cookie. It didn't sound like it. But I couldn't be sure.

"You know, scientists found that dogs maybe really do laugh," I said. My words were spilling fast, like pennies from a holey pocket. "They make this noise when they're playing. It's not exactly panting. More like a puffing sound, sort of. But they think it could be dog laughter."

"No kidding," the clerk said. He sounded grumpy. Maybe because the puppy had just peed on his shoe.

The puppy scrambled over to nose me. He was dragging a boy who looked about four years old. The boy was wearing dinosaur slippers. His nose was running big-time.

"He's wagging," the boy said. "He likes you."

"I read somewhere that when a dog's tail wags to his right, it means he's feeling happy about something," I said. "Left, not so much."

The clerk stood. He was holding the wad of paper towel in his outstretched hand like it was nuclear waste.

I made myself meet his eyes. I felt hot and shaky. "Where's the dog chow? The stuff in the red bag with green stripes?" I asked.

"Aisle nine."

"You know lots about dogs," the little boy said to me.

"I'm going to be an animal scientist," I told him. "I have to know lots."

"I have a sore throat but it's not strep," the boy said, wiping his nose with the back of his hand. "My mom is buying food for King Kong. That's our guinea pig."

"Good name."

"And this is Turbo."

"Also a good name."

I reached into my pocket and felt the cookie there.

My eyes burned and blurred. I sniffled.

"You have a cold too?" the boy asked.

"Something like that." I let Turbo lick my hand and headed to the back.

"He's wagging to the right, I think," the boy called.



36

I'd never stolen anything before last spring. Except for the unfortunate incident with the yo-yo when I was five and used very bad judgment.

It was a surprise how good I was at it.

It's like when you discover you have an unusual talent. Being able to lick your elbow, for instance. Or wiggle your ears.

I felt like a magician. Now you see it, now you don't. Watch Magic Jackson make this quarter appear

from behind your ear! Watch this bubble gum disappear before your eyes!

Gum is harder than you'd think. It's the perfect size for slipping into your pocket. But it's usually right next to the place where you pay. So it's easier for a clerk to see you are up to no good.

I'd only shoplifted four times. Twice to get food for Robin, and once to get gum for me.

And now the dog cookie.

I got my start with jars of baby food. Even though she was five, Robin liked eating it sometimes. The stinky meat kind, not even the fruit goo.

Don't ask me why. I will never understand that girl.

We'd stopped at a Safeway grocery store because Robin had to go to the bathroom. She wanted to get something to eat, but my mom said wait till later. While they went to find the restroom, I wandered down the aisles to kill time.

And then I saw the Gerber baby food. I slipped

two jars of chicken and rice into my pockets. Smooth and easy as could be.

Nobody seemed to notice. Probably because who would think a kid my age would steal something that looks like brown snot?

In the next aisle, I passed a guy from my school with his dad. Paul something. He was pushing their shopping cart. They had a giant snack pack of barbecue potato chips and those lemonade drinks in little boxes and a giant bag of red apples.

I waved very casually. An it's-not-like-I'm-showing-bad-judgment-or-anything kind of wave. Paul waved back.

I walked right out the door with Robin and my mom, no sweat. No lightning came down to zap me. No police cars zoomed in with sirens howling like coyotes.

Later at home, I pretended to find the jars in the back of a cupboard. My mom was really happy, and so was Robin.

I was amazed how easy the lying came. It was like turning on a faucet. The words just rushed right out.

I felt guilty for not feeling guilty. I mean, I'd shoplifted. I'd taken something that didn't belong to me. I was a criminal.

But I told myself that in nature it's survival of the fittest. Eat or be eaten. Kill or be killed.

They say those things a lot in nature films. Right after the lion eats the zebra.

Of course I wasn't a lion. I was a person who knew right from wrong. And stealing was wrong.

But here's the truth. I felt crummy about the stealing. But I felt even worse about the lying.

If you like facts the way I do, try lying sometime. It'll surprise you how hard it is to do.

Still and all. Even though I felt lousy, I had fixed a problem.

Robin gobbled down the chicken-and-rice goo so fast that she threw up most of it on my book about cheetahs. I figured maybe that was my punishment.

37

When we got home from the pet store, I went to my room, half expecting to see Crenshaw lounging on my bed. Instead, I found Aretha. Her nose was buried in my keepsakes bag, and she had a guilty expression on her face. She for sure had something in her mouth, but I couldn't see what it was.

"Show me," I said. I pulled the stolen dog cookie from my pocket. It was a little mushed on one side. I held it out so that Aretha would drop whatever was

in her mouth and snatch the cookie. But she wasn't interested.

Probably she didn't want to eat stolen goods.

Aretha slunk toward my bedroom door, tail dragging, and I saw what she was holding. It was the clay statue I'd made of Crenshaw, clutched between her teeth.

"You don't want that old thing," I said, but she seemed to disagree. As soon as she was out of my bedroom, she galloped down the hall and scratched urgently at the front door.

"Want me to open it, baby?" Robin asked. She turned the knob and Aretha rocketed outside.

"Aretha! Stop!" I yelled. Usually she waited by the door for me, flopping her tail hopefully. Not today.

I grabbed her leash. She was heading straight for Marisol's house, which was about half a block down the street. Aretha loved Marisol. She also loved Marisol's seven cats, who enjoyed sunbathing on the screened-in back porch.

I found Aretha in Marisol's old sandbox. Marisol

didn't use it anymore, but Aretha loved it. She was already digging a hole. Sand fanned skyward like sprinkler spray.

Aretha was an expert digger. She'd buried two water bowls, a TV remote control, a pizza box, a zip-lock bag of Legos, three Frisbees, and two of my homework folders there. Not that my teachers had believed me.

Marisol was wearing flip-flops and her pajamas, which had snoring sheep on them. She loved pajamas. In first grade, she wore them to school every day until the principal told her she was setting a bad example.

In her left hand, Marisol had a large saw. Her hair was covered with sawdust. She almost always smelled like fresh-cut wood.

Marisol loved to build things, especially things for animals and birds and reptiles. She made birdhouses and bat shelters. Dog carriers and cat trees. Hamster habitats and ferret houses.

At the end of her fenced yard were planks, a sawhorse, and a big circular saw. A small house-looking

thing was on the ground, half built. It was for one of her cats.

"Hey," I said.

"Hey," she said. "You ready for the yard sale?"

"I guess."

"Aretha brought me that," Marisol said. She pointed to my Crenshaw statue, which was sitting on the picnic table. "Dropped it right at my feet."

"I made it when I was little," I said with a shrug. "It's lame."

"If you made it, it's not lame," Marisol said. She put down her saw and examined the statue.

Aretha stopped digging and looked up at us hopefully. Her face was covered in sand. Her tongue lolled sideways.

"It's a cat," Marisol said, brushing off a piece of grass stuck to the bottom. "A standing cat with a baseball cap. I like it. I like it very much."

I shrugged, hands in my pockets.

"Was this for the yard sale?" Marisol asked. "How much is it?"

"It's not for sale. Aretha got into a bag of my stuff is all."

"I have three dollars."

"For that?" I laughed. "It's just, you know. A hunk of clay. Some school project."

"I like it. It's . . . intriguing." Marisol reached into her pajama pocket. She handed me a wad of money that looked like it had been through the laundry.

"Keep it," I said. "Think of it as a going-away present."

Her eyes went wide. "What are you talking about, Jackson? You're not—"

I waved a hand. "No. It's probably nothing. My parents are just being their usual weird selves."

It wasn't the truth, not completely. But it wasn't not the truth.

"You'd better not move. I'd miss you too much. Who would help me with See Spot Walk? And anyway, I love your weird parents."

I didn't respond.

"We've got the dachshunds tomorrow," Marisol said.

"Yep." I pointed to the miniature zigzag staircase she was building. "Where's that going?"

"Antonio's old room, when he heads off to college this fall. Or maybe Luis's. His room is just full of boxes."

"You're like an only child," I said.

"It's kind of boring," Marisol said, pushing a strand of hair behind her ear. "There's no one to fight with. It's too quiet."

"Sounds nice."

"I like your apartment. There's always something going on. Sometimes it's just me and Paula for days on end." She rolled her eyes.

Marisol's dad was a salesman and her mom was a pilot. They traveled a lot, so Paula, an older woman, often stayed with Marisol. Marisol refused to call her a "nanny" or "babysitter" or "caregiver." She was just "Paula."

Marisol grabbed a tape measure to check the

height of the staircase she was making. "I'm going to attach this staircase to the wall, see? Like so? And then put shelves way up high for the cats to climb to. It'll be cat paradise."

"Speaking of cats . . ." I bent down to fill in the hole Aretha had made. The sand was soft and dry. "Did I ever tell you . . ." I hesitated, then pushed on. "Did I ever tell you that I had an imaginary friend when I was little?"

"Really? Me too. Her name was Whoops. She had red hair and was extremely naughty. I blamed her for everything. Who was yours?"

"He was a cat. A big cat. I don't remember much about him."

"You should never forget your imaginary friend."

"How come?"

"What if you need him someday?" Marisol reached for a piece of wood. "I remember everything about Whoops. She liked to eat brussels sprouts."

"Why?" I pretended to gag.

"Probably because I like brussels sprouts."

"You never told me that. I may have to reconsider our friendship."

"Because of Whoops? Or the brussels sprouts?" She yanked a nail out of a plank with her hammer. "Hey, new bat fact. In Austin, Texas, they have the world's largest urban bat colony. Like a million and a half of them. When they fly out at night, you can see them on the airport radar screens."

"Very cool," I said. "Ms. Malone would love seeing that."

Marisol and I both had Ms. Malone for fourth grade. She taught all subjects, but she loved science best of all. Biology especially.

We chatted about bats while we watched Aretha dig another hole. Finally I said, "Well. Gotta go."

I hooked Aretha to her leash. She licked my cheek with a sand-covered tongue. It felt like a cat's.

"Did Whoops ever . . . you know?" I made myself ask the question. "Did she ever come back after you outgrew her?"

Marisol didn't answer right away. Sometimes she

just let a question sit for a while, like she needed some time to get acquainted with it.

"I wish she *would* come back," Marisol said, gazing at me. "I think you'd like her."

I nodded. "Yeah. I guess I could overlook the brussels sprouts thing."

"Jackson?"

"Yep?"

"You're not really moving, are you?"

I studied her question the way she'd studied mine. "Probably not," I said, because it was easy, and easy was all I could manage.

Aretha and I were almost to the front yard when Marisol called, "It needs a name."

"You mean the statue?"

"Yeah. Something unique."

"What do you want its name to be?" I asked.

She didn't answer right away. She took her time.

Finally she said, "Crenshaw would be a good name for a cat, I think."

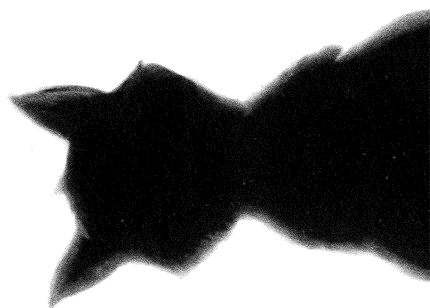


I crossed the street. Twice I looked back. Marisol waved.

Crenshaw.

It must have been written on the bottom of the statue. By my teacher or my mom or me.

There's always a logical explanation, I told myself.
Always.



39

That night I sat on my mattress, staring at what was left of my bedroom. My old bed, shaped like a red race car, the one I'd outgrown ages ago, was in pieces. A sticker on the headboard said \$25 OR BEST OFFER. Dents in the carpeting hinted at what used to be there. A cube where my nightstand should have been. A rectangle where my dresser once stood.

My mom and dad came in after Robin was asleep.

“How you doing, bud?” my dad asked. “Definitely roomier, huh?”

“It’s like camping out,” I said.

“Without the mosquitoes,” said my mom. She handed me a plastic mug of water. I kept it by my bed in case I got thirsty in the middle of the night. She’d been doing that for as long as I could remember. The mug, which had a faded picture of Thomas the Tank Engine on it, was probably nearly as old as I was.

My dad touched the mattress with his cane. “Next bed, let’s make it more serious.”

“Not a race car.” My mom nodded.

“Maybe a Volvo,” said my dad.

“How about just a bed bed?” I asked.

“Absolutely.” My mom leaned over and combed her fingers through my hair. “A bed bed.”

“We’ll probably make some bucks at the sale,” my dad said. “So there’s that.”

“They’re just things,” my mom said quietly. “We can always get new things.”

“It’s okay. I like all the space,” I said. “I think

Aretha does, too. And Robin can practice batting without knocking anything over.”

Both my parents smiled. For a few moments, neither spoke.

“All right, we’re outta here,” my mom finally said.

As he turned to leave, my dad said, “You know, you’re such a big help, Jackson. You never complain, and you’re always ready to pitch in. We really appreciate that.”

My mom blew me a kiss. “He’s pretty amazing,” she agreed. She winked at my dad. “Let’s keep him around.”

They closed the door. I had one lamp left. Its light carved a yellow frown on my carpet.

I closed my eyes. I imagined our things spread out on the lawn tomorrow. My mom was right, of course. They were just things. Bits of plastic and wood and cardboard and steel. Bunches of atoms.

I knew all too well that there were people in the world who didn’t have Monopoly games or race car

beds. I had a roof over my head. I had food most of the time. I had clothes and blankets and a dog and a family.

Still, I felt twisted inside. Like I'd swallowed a knotted-up rope.

It wasn't about losing my stuff.

Well, okay. Maybe that was a little part of it.

It wasn't about feeling different from other kids.

Well, okay. Maybe that was part of it too.

What bothered me most, though, was that I couldn't fix anything. I couldn't control anything. It was like driving a bumper car without a steering wheel. I kept getting slammed, and I just had to sit there and hold on tight.

Bam. Were we going to have enough to eat tomorrow? *Bam.* Were we going to be able to pay the rent? *Bam.* Would I go to the same school in the fall?

Bam. Would it happen again?

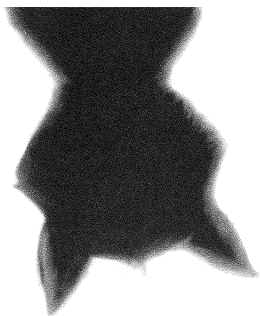
I took deep breaths. In, out. In, out. My fists clenched and unclenched. I tried not to think about Crenshaw on the TV or the dog cookie I'd stolen.

Then, just the way I'd taken that cookie, without understanding why, without thinking about the consequences, without any *reason*, I grabbed my mug and hurled it against the wall.

Bam. It splintered into shards of cracked plastic. I liked the noise it made.

I waited for my parents to return, to ask what's wrong, to yell at me for breaking something, but no one came.

Water trickled down the wall, slowly fading like an old map of a faraway river.



40

I woke in the night, sweaty and startled. I'd been having a dream. Something about a giant talking cat with a bubble beard.

Oh.

Aretha, who likes to share my pillow when she can get away with it, was drooling onto the pillowcase. Her feet were dream-twitching. I wondered if she was dreaming about Crenshaw. She'd certainly seemed to like him.

Wait. I felt my brain screech to a halt, like a cartoon character about to careen off a cliff.

Aretha had *seen* Crenshaw.

At the very least, she'd reacted to him. She'd tried to lick him. She'd tried to play with him. She'd seemed to know he was there.

Dogs have amazing senses. They can tell when a person is about to have a seizure. They can hear sounds when we hear only silence. They can unearth a piece of hot dog buried at the bottom of a neighbor's trash can.

But however amazing dogs can be, they cannot see somebody's imaginary friend. They cannot jump into their owner's brain.

So did that mean Crenshaw was real? Or was Aretha just responding to my body language? Could she tell I was freaking out? Or did she figure I'd come up with a brand-new game called Let's Play with the Giant Invisible Cat?

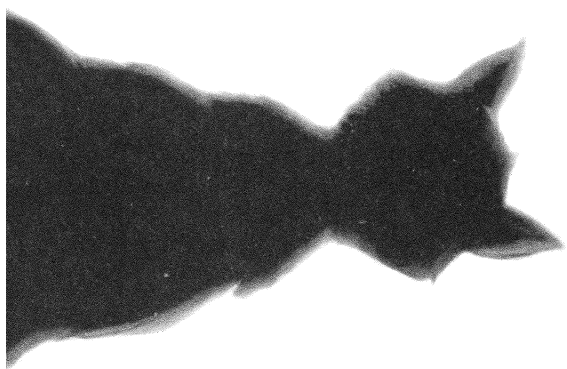
I tried to recall how she'd acted back when we

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were living in our minivan. Had she sensed Crenshaw's presence then?

I couldn't remember. I didn't want to remember.

I covered my face with my drooly pillow and tried to go back to sleep.



"Ribbit," said something.

I opened my eyes. A frog was on my forehead.

He looked familiar. Like the windowsill visitor Crenshaw had wanted to eat.

I turned my head and the frog leaped off. Next to me lay a human-sized cat. On top of Crenshaw lay a medium-sized dog. And on top of Aretha sat the frog.

Two of the three were snoring.

I sat up on my elbows. I blinked. Blinked again.
I'd left the window ajar. That explained the frog.
It did not explain the cat.

"You're back," I said.

"Morning," Crenshaw murmured, his eyes still closed. He wrapped his paws around Aretha, snuggling close.

"Just tell me this," I said. I crawled off my mattress and stretched. "How do I get rid of you for good?"

"I'm here to help you," Crenshaw said. He yawned. His teeth were like little knives. He pulled one of Aretha's velvety ears over his eyes to block out the sun.

"What did you mean about telling the truth?" I asked.

"Truth is important to you," said Crenshaw. "So it's important to me. Now, please allow me to continue my slumber."

"Are you my conscience?" I asked.

"That depends. Would you like me to be?"

I checked my closet, just in case there was a giant invisible possum or gopher or something lurking there. “No,” I said. “I’m managing just fine on my own.”

“Oh, really?” said Crenshaw. “What’s that abominable dog treat lying on the floor?”

The cookie. Aretha still hadn’t eaten it.

I tossed it out my window. Maybe squirrels wouldn’t mind eating something stolen.

“Remember when you stole the yo-yo back when you were five?” Crenshaw asked.

“When my parents caught me, I tried to blame you.”

“Everyone always blames the imaginary friend.”

“Then my parents made me take it back and apologize to the store.”

“I think you see where this is going.” Another yawn. “Now, if you don’t mind, I’ll be taking a little catnap.”

I stared at him. He’d made me feel mystified and annoyed and more than a little crazy. And now he

was making me feel guilty. One way or another, I had to get him out of my life.

“By the way,” I said before leaving the room, “you’re hugging a dog.”

I didn’t see what happened next, but I heard a hiss and a yowl. Aretha dashed past me at high speed.

She hid under the kitchen table for an hour.

42

Selling your stuff at a yard sale is a weird experience. It's like walking around with your clothes on inside out. Underwear on top of jeans, socks on top of sneakers.

The insides of your apartment are spread out for everybody to see and touch. Strangers finger the lamp that used to be on your bedside table. Sweaty guys sit in your dad's favorite chair. Little stickers are on everything. Five dollars for your old tricycle that still has sparklers on the wheels. Fifty cents for the Candy Land game.

It was a sunny Sunday morning. Lots of neighbors were selling stuff, too. It almost felt like a party. My mom sat at a card table with a little box to hold money. My dad walked around while people bargained with him and said how about two dollars instead of three.

When he got too tired to walk, he sat in a folding chair and played songs on his guitar and sang. Sometimes my mom would sing harmony.

My main job was to carry stuff to people's cars and to keep an eye on Robin. She was pulling someone's old wagon that had a \$4 sign taped to it. In the wagon was her trash can with the blue bunnies, which my parents had promised she could keep.

It wasn't so bad, watching our things get sold. I told myself that every dollar we made was a good thing and that it was all just meaningless stuff. And it was nice to be with our neighbors and friends, drinking lemonade and talking and singing along with my parents.

Around noon, we'd sold almost everything. I

watched my mom count up the money we'd made. She looked over at my dad and shook her head. "Not even close to what we need," she said quietly.

Before he could respond, a skinny man with a ponytail approached my dad. He pulled out a fancy leather wallet and asked my dad if his guitar was for sale. My dad and mom exchanged a glance. "Could be, I suppose," said my dad.

"I have one that's for sale, too," my mom added quickly. "It's back in the apartment."

My dad held up his guitar. Sunlight darted off its smooth black body. "It's a beauty," said my dad. "Lotta history."

"Dad," I exclaimed, "you can't sell your guitar."

"There's always another guitar around the bend, Jacks," said my dad, but he wouldn't meet my eyes.

Robin ran over. She was still towing the wagon, which nobody had bought. "You can't sell that!" she cried. "It's named after Jackson!"

"Actually," I said, "*I* was named after the guitar."

"It doesn't matter!" Robin's eyes welled with tears.

"That's a keepsake for keeping. Here. You can have my trash can for free, mister. Instead."

She thrust her trash can into the skinny man's hands. "I, uh—" the man began. "I . . . it's a dynamite trash can, sweetie. I really like the . . . the bunnies. But I'm more in the market for a guitar."

"No guitars, no way," Robin said.

My dad gave the man a helpless shrug. "Sorry, man," he said. "You heard the lady. Tell you what, though. Why don't you give me your phone number? In case we have a change of heart. I'll walk you out to your car."

Together, my dad and the man headed toward a sleek black car. My dad's left foot dragged a little. Sometimes that happens with MS.

They exchanged scraps of paper, talked, and nodded. The skinny man drove off, and I had a feeling that my dad's change of heart had already happened.

43

About an hour later, our landlord came by our apartment. He had an envelope in his hand. He hugged my mom and shook my dad's hand and said he wished things could be different. I knew what the paper was because I could see the words at the top.

It said FINAL EVICTION NOTICE. Which meant we had to leave the apartment.

My dad leaned against the wall. There wasn't anywhere to sit anymore.

"Kids," he said, "looks like we're going to be taking a little drive."

"To Grandma's?" asked Robin.

"Not exactly," said my mom. She slammed a cupboard door shut.

My dad knelt down next to Robin. He had to use his cane to keep steady. "We have to move, baby. But it will be fun. You'll see."

Robin's eyes bored into me. "You told me it would be okay, Jacks," she said. "You lied."

"I didn't lie," I lied.

"This isn't Jackson's fault, Robin," my mom said. "Don't blame him. Blame us."

I didn't wait to hear any more. I ran to my room. Crenshaw was lying on my bed.

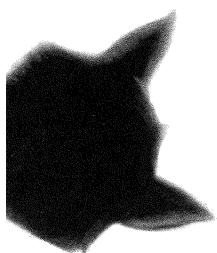
I sat next to him, and when I buried my head in his fur, he didn't object. He purred loudly.

I cried a little, but not much. There wasn't any point.

Once I read a book called *Why Cats Purr and Other Feline Mysteries*.

Turns out nobody knows for sure why cats purr.

It's surprising how much stuff adults don't know.



44

At four that afternoon, Marisol came to the door. She was wearing flip-flops and flowered pajamas. She had the Gouchers' dachshunds, Frank and Beans, with her. "Did you forget?" she asked. "You were supposed to meet me."

I apologized and took Frank's leash. As we started down the sidewalk, I was surprised to see Crenshaw walking ahead of us. Not as surprised as I might have been a day or two ago. But still. There he was,

gliding along on his hind legs, doing the occasional cartwheel or handstand.

I didn't know how to tell Marisol why we were leaving. I'd never told her about our money problems, although she may have guessed by the way I didn't offer her anything to eat when she came over, or by the way my clothes were always a little too small.

I wasn't lying, exactly. It was more that I left out certain facts and focused on others.

I didn't want to do it, of course. I liked facts. And so did Marisol. But sometimes facts were just too hard to share.

I decided to tell Marisol something about a sick relative, about how we had to go take care of him, and how it was an all-of-a-sudden kind of thing. But just as I started to speak, Crenshaw leaned close and whispered in my ear: "The truth, Jackson."

I squeezed my eyes shut and counted to ten. Slowly.

Ten seconds seemed like the right amount of time for me to stop being crazy.

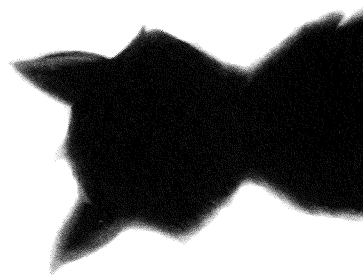
I opened my eyes. Marisol was smiling at me.

And then I told her everything. I told her about how worried I'd been and how we were hungry sometimes and how afraid I was about what might come next.

We walked toward the school playground. Crenshaw strode ahead and rocketed down the tube slide. When he got to the bottom, he looked at me and nodded approvingly.

And then, I don't know why, I told Marisol one more fact.

I told her about Crenshaw.



45

I waited for her to tell me I was nuts.

“Look.” Marisol knelt down to scratch Beans behind the ear. “We don’t know everything. I don’t know why my brothers feel the need to burp the alphabet. I don’t know why I like to build things. I don’t know why there are no rainbow M&M’s. Why do you have to understand everything, Jackson? I like not knowing everything. It makes things more interesting.”

"Science is about facts. Life is about facts. Crenshaw is not a fact." I shrugged. "If you understand how something happens, then you can make it happen again. Or not happen."

"You want Crenshaw to go away?"

"Yes," I said loudly. Then, more softly: "No. I don't know."

She smiled. "I wish I could see him."

"Black. White. Hairy," I said. "Extremely tall."

"What's he doing right now?"

"One-handed push-ups."

"You're kidding me. I'd love to see that."

I groaned. "Look, it's okay. Go ahead and call a psychiatrist. Have me committed."

Marisol punched me in the shoulder. Hard.

"Ow!" I cried. "Hey!"

"You're annoying me," she said. "Look, if I were worried about you, I'd tell you so. I'm your friend. But I don't think you're going crazy."

"You think it's normal to have a giant kitty taking bubble baths in your house?"

Marisol puckered her lips like she'd just chewed a lemon. "Remember in second grade when that magician came to the school fair?"

"He was so lame."

"Remember how you went behind the stage and figured out how he was making that rabbit appear? And then you told everybody?"

I grinned. "Figured it right out."

"But you took the magic away, Jackson. I liked thinking that little gray bunny appeared in a man's hat. I liked believing it was magic."

"But it wasn't. He had a hole in the hat, and—"

Marisol covered her ears. "I didn't care!" she cried, punching me again. "And I still don't care!"

"Ow," I said. "Again."

"Jackson," Marisol said, "just enjoy the magic while you can, okay?"

I didn't answer. We walked in silence, following our usual route. Past the little park with the fountain. Past the bike path I'd ridden a zillion times, back when I had a bike. Past the place where I broke

my arm popping a wheelie. Past the sign that said WELCOME TO SWANLAKE VILLAGE.

"I read that swans stay together for life," Marisol said.

"Usually," I said. "Not always."

"You and I will be friends for life," Marisol said. She stated it like any nature fact. Like she'd just said "The grass is green."

"I don't even know where my family's going."

"Doesn't matter. You can send me postcards. You can e-mail me from the library. You'll find a way."

I kicked at a stone. "I'm glad I told you about Crenshaw," I said. "Thank you for not laughing."

"I can practically see him," said Marisol. "He's doing backflips on my front lawn."

"Actually, he's doing the splits on your driveway."

"I said *practically* see him." She smiled at me. "Fun fact, Jackson. You can't see sound waves, but you can hear music."

46

That evening, Crenshaw and I went out to the backyard.

Crenshaw liked night.

He liked the way the stars took their time showing up. He liked the way the grass let go of the sun's warmth. He liked the way crickets changed the music.

But mostly he liked to eat the crickets.

We lay there, me on my back, Crenshaw on his side, with Aretha nearby gnawing on a tennis ball.

Every so often she looked up, ears cocked, sniffing the air.

It felt good, talking as the night took over. It almost made me forget that we were leaving the next day. It almost made me stop feeling the anger and sadness weighing me down like invisible anchors.

Crenshaw trapped a cricket under his big paw.

I told him crickets were considered lucky in China.

“Crickets are considered delicious in Thailand,” he replied. His tail looped and snaked like a lasso at a rodeo. “And in cat-land.”

I chewed on a piece of grass. It’s a good way to distract yourself when you’re hungry. “How do you know that?”

Crenshaw glanced at me. “I know everything you know. That’s how imaginary friends operate.”

“Do you know things I don’t know?”

“Well, I know what it’s like to be an imaginary friend.” Crenshaw slapped at a moth with his other front paw. The moth fluttered over his head like it was laughing at him.

"I hate moths," he said. "They're butterfly poseurs."

"I don't know what that means."

"Butterfly wannabes."

"If you know everything I know, how come you know words I don't know?"

"It's been three years, Jackson. A cat can do a lot of learning in that time. I read the dictionary four times last month."

He tried for the moth again and missed.

"You used to be faster," I pointed out.

"I used to be smaller." Crenshaw licked his paw.

"I've been meaning to ask you why you're so much bigger. You weren't this big when I was seven."

"You need a bigger friend now," said Crenshaw.

My mom walked by with a box of clothing to put in the minivan. "Jackson?" she said. "You okay?"

"Yep."

"I thought I heard you talking to somebody."

I cast a look at Crenshaw. "Just talking to myself. You know."

My mom smiled. "An excellent conversational partner."

"Do you need any help, Mom?"

"Nope. Not much to pack, when you get right down to it. Thanks, sweetie."

Crenshaw lifted his paw. The cricket scrambled for freedom. Down went the paw. Not enough to kill the poor bug. Just enough to annoy him.

"Do you ever feel guilty about the way cats torture things? Bugs, mice, flies?" I asked. "I know it's instinct and all. But still."

"Of course not. It's what we do. It's hunting practice. Survival of the fittest." He lifted his paw, and this time the cricket made a quick getaway. "Life isn't always fair, Jackson."

"Yeah," I said, sighing. "I know."

"In any case, you're the one who made me a cat."

"I don't remember deciding that. You just sort of . . . happened."

Aretha dropped her ball in front of Crenshaw. He sniffed it disdainfully.

"Cats do not play," Crenshaw told her. "We do not frolic. We do not gambol. We nap, we kill, and we eat."

Aretha wagged wildly, still hopeful.

"Fine." Crenshaw blew on the tennis ball. It rolled a few inches. Aretha nabbed it with her teeth and tossed it in the air.

"That was playful of you," I said. I plucked a new piece of grass to chew on. "For someone who doesn't play."

"I fear you may have made me with a hint of dog thrown in." Crenshaw shuddered. "Sometimes I actually want to . . . to roll in something stinky. A dead skunk maybe, or some ripe trash."

"Dogs do that because—"

"I know why. Because they're idiots. I also know you will never, ever catch this fine feline specimen stooping so low."

I sat up. The moon was thin and yellow. "Anything else I put in the mix?"

"Well, I sometimes worry I have a bit of fish in me. I rather like water."

I thought back to my first-grade self. “I liked fish a lot when I was seven. I had a goldfish named George.”

“Of course,” said Crenshaw. “You liked a lot of animals back then. Rats, manatees, cheetahs. You name it.” He groaned. “Bats, too. No wonder I like to eat mosquitoes.”

“Sorry,” I said, but I couldn’t help smiling.

“At least you worked with animals. I have a friend—nice guy—who was made entirely of ice cream. Hated hot weather.”

“Wait.” I let that sink in. “You mean you know *other* imaginary friends?”

“Of course. Cats are solitary, but we’re not completely antisocial.” He yawned. “I’ve met Marisol’s imaginary friend, Whoops. And your dad’s.”

“My dad had an imaginary friend?” I cried.

“It’s more common than you might think, Jackson.” Crenshaw yawned again. “I feel a snooze coming on.”

“Wait,” I said. “Before you go to sleep, just tell me about my dad’s friend.”

Crenshaw closed his eyes. “He plays the guitar, I think.”

“My dad?”

“No. His friend. Plays the trombone, too, if I recall correctly. He’s a dog. Scrawny. Not much to look at.”

“What’s his name?”

“Starts with an *F*. Unusual name. Franco? Fiji?” Crenshaw snapped his fingers. Which is not something cats generally do. “Finian!” he said. “It’s Finian. Nice guy, for a dog.”

“Finian,” I repeated. “Hmm. Where are you, Crenshaw, when you’re not with me?”

“You’ve seen a teachers’ lounge, right?”

“I’ve peeked. We’re not allowed in. Mostly I saw a lot of coffee cups and Mr. Destephano napping on a couch.”

“Picture a giant teachers’ lounge. Lots of people

waiting and snoozing and telling stories about exasperating, amazing children. That's where I stay. That's where I wait, just in case you need me."

"That's all you do?"

"That's plenty. Imaginary friends are like books. We're created, we're enjoyed, we're dog-eared and creased, and then we're tucked away until we're needed again."

Crenshaw rolled onto his back and closed his eyes. A good cat fact to know is that they only expose their tummies when they feel safe.

His purr filled the air like a lawn mower.

I couldn't fall asleep that night. Sounds echoed off the walls of our empty apartment. Shadows loomed and shrank. A question kept nagging at me: Why did things have to be this way?

Life isn't always fair, Crenshaw had said. His words reminded me of an interesting nature fact Ms. Malone had taught us last year in fourth grade.

Bats, she said, actually share food with each other. She was talking about vampire bats, the ones that

slice open sleeping mammals in the dark of night. They don't actually suck blood. It's more like they lap it up, which is awesome enough. But the really amazing part, the *no way* part, is that when they get back to their caves, they share with the unlucky bats who haven't found anything to eat. They actually puke up warm blood into the hungry bats' mouths.

If that's not the coolest nature fact ever, I don't know what is.

Ms. Malone said maybe bats are altruists, which means they're sharing to help the other bats, even if it's a risk. She said some scientists say yes, some say no.

Scientists love to disagree about things.

Ms. Malone looked at me then, because even though it was only like the third week of school, she already had me pegged pretty well. "Jackson," she said, "maybe you'll be the one to settle the great *Are Bats Nice Guys?* debate."

I said probably not, because I wanted to be a

PART THREE

cheetah or manatee or dog scientist, but I would keep bats in mind as a backup plan.

Ms. Malone said something else about bats that day.

She said she sometimes wondered if maybe bats are better human beings than human beings are.



48

I must have finally fallen asleep, because I woke from a horrible nightmare. I was panting. Tears streamed down my cheeks. The moon was wrapped in fog.

Crenshaw placed a paw on my shoulder. Gently he butted his head against mine.

“Bad dream?” he asked.

“I don’t remember it, really. I was in a cave, I

think, and I was yelling for someone to help me, and nobody would listen.”

“I’ll help,” said Crenshaw. “I’ll listen.”

I turned to him. Looking in his eyes, I could see myself reflected.

“I can’t go with my family,” I said. My own words surprised me. “I can’t live in the minivan again. I don’t want to have to worry anymore. I’m tired, Crenshaw.”

“I know,” he said. “I know.”

I blinked. The answer was obvious.

I had to run away.

It wasn’t going to be much of a trip. I’d just have to ask Marisol if I could stay with her. She had plenty of room. I could help around the house.

I leaped up. Crenshaw watched me, but he didn’t say a word.

It wasn’t like I had a lot to pack. I grabbed my pillow, my keepsakes bag, some clothes, and my toothbrush.

The way I figured it, I’d go over to Marisol’s house

before my family woke up. Marisol was an early riser. She wouldn't mind.

It was hard to find a piece of paper and a pencil, but I managed. Aretha and Crenshaw watched me chew on the pencil as I tried to decide what to write.

"What should I say?" I asked, as much to myself as to Crenshaw.

"Tell the truth to the person who matters most," said Crenshaw. "You."

And so I did.

Dear Mom and Dad,

Here are the facts.

I am tired of not knowing what is going to happen.

I am old enough to understand things.

I hate living this way.

I'm going to live with Marisol for a while.

When you figure things out, maybe I can join you.

*Love,
Jackson*

PS: Aretha likes to sleep on a pillow, so don't forget.

PPS: Robin needs to know what's happening, too.

In an envelope, I put ten dollars I'd made from walking the Gouchers' dachshunds. On the outside I wrote: To cover two unfortunate incidents where I used very bad judgment, please give \$7 to Safeway (for 2 jars of Gerber chicken and rice) and \$3 to Pet Food Express (for a cookie shaped like a cat).

49

Ta-tap-ta-ta-tap.

It was Robin, knocking at my door. "Jacks?"

I dropped my pencil. "Go to sleep, Robin. It's late."

"It's scary in my room."

"It'll be morning soon," I said.

"I'll just wait here by your door," Robin said. "I have Spot to keep me company."

I looked at Crenshaw. He held up his paws. "Don't

ask me. Human children are infinitely more complicated than kittens.”

“Please go back to bed, Robin,” I pleaded.

“I don’t mind waiting,” she said.

I stood.

I went to the door.

I hesitated.

I opened it.

Robin came in. She had Spot, her pillow, and her Lyle book.

I looked at her.

I looked at my note.

I crumpled it up and tossed it aside.

We read Lyle together until we both fell asleep.

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When I awoke, Robin, Aretha, and Crenshaw were spread out on my mattress. Robin and Aretha were both drooling a little.

Sitting on the floor across from us were my mom and dad. They had on their bathrobes. My dad had my crumpled note, flattened out, in his lap.

“Good morning,” my mom whispered.

I didn’t answer her. I didn’t even look at her.

"Fact," my dad said softly. "Parents make mistakes."

"A lot," my mom added.

"Fact," said my dad. "Parents try not to burden their kids with grown-up problems. But sometimes that's hard to do."

Robin stirred, but she didn't wake.

"Well, it's hard being a kid, too," I said. I was glad I sounded so angry. "It's hard not to know what's happening."

"I know," said my dad.

"I don't want to go back to that time," I said, my voice getting louder with each word. "I hated you for putting us through it. It wasn't fair. Other kids don't have to sleep in their car. Other kids aren't hungry."

I knew that wasn't true. I knew that lots of other kids had it worse than I did. But I didn't care.

"Why can't you just be like other parents?" I demanded. I was crying hard. I gasped for breath.

"Why does it have to be this way?"

My mom came over and tried to hug me. I wouldn't let her.

"We're so sorry, sweetheart," she whispered.

My dad sniffed. He cleared his throat.

I looked over at Crenshaw. He was awake, watching me carefully.

I took a deep, shuddery breath. "I know you're sorry. But that doesn't change the way things are."

"You're right," said my dad.

No one talked for a few minutes. The only sound was Crenshaw, purring gently. And only I could hear him.

Slowly, very slowly, I began to feel my anger changing into something softer.

"It's okay," I finally said. "It's really okay. I just want you to tell me the truth from now on. That's all."

"That's fair," my dad said.

"More than fair," my mom agreed.

"I'm getting older," I said. "I can handle it."

“Well, then here’s another fact,” said my dad. “Last night I called the guy who wanted to buy our guitars. He told me his brother owns that music store down by the mall. He needs an assistant manager. His brother also has a garage apartment behind the store that won’t be occupied for a month. It’d give us a roof over our heads for a little while, anyway. Maybe some more work.”

“That’s good, right?” I asked.

“It’s good,” my dad said. “But it’s not a certainty. Here’s the thing, Jackson. Life is messy. It’s complicated. It would be nice if life were always like this.” He drew an imaginary line that kept going up and up. “But life is actually a lot more like this.” He made a jiggly line that went up and down like a mountain range. “You just have to keep trying.”

“What’s that expression?” asked my mom. “Fall down seven times, get up eight?”

“More fortune cookie wisdom,” said my dad. “But it’s true.”

My mom patted my back. “Starting today, we’ll

be as honest with you as we can. Is that what you want?"

I looked over at Crenshaw. He nodded.

"Yes," I said. "That's what I want."

"All right, then," said my dad. "It's a deal."

"Fact," said my mom. "I'd really like some breakfast. Let's go see what we can do about that."



The music store looked pretty run-down. We waited in the car while my parents went to talk to the owner. It took a long time. Robin and I played cerealball with her T-ball cap and some sugarless bubble gum.

“You remember those purple jelly beans?” Robin asked.

“The magic ones?”

Robin nodded. “They were maybe not so magic.”

I sat up straighter. “What do you mean?”

"They were from Kylie's birthday party." Robin pulled on her ponytail. "I just wanted you to think they were magic. But there's no such thing. Of course."

"I don't know," I said. "Could be magic happens sometimes."

"Really?" Robin asked.

"Really," I said.

When my parents came out of the store, they were smiling. They shook a man's hand, and he gave my dad a set of keys.

"Got the job," my dad said. "It's part-time, but with everything else, it should help. And we can stay in that apartment for a month, anyway. Hopefully by then we'll have come up with yet another plan. We really want to keep you and Robin at the same school. We're going to do our best, but there are no guarantees."

"I know," I said, and even though it didn't solve all our problems, I felt a little better.

PART THREE

The garage apartment was tiny, with only one bedroom. There was no TV, and the carpeting was a weary beige.

Still. It had a roof and a door and a family who needed it.



The article I read about imaginary friends said they often appear during times of stress. It said that as kids mature, they tend to outgrow their pretend world.

But Crenshaw told me something else.

He said imaginary friends never leave. He said they were on call. Just waiting, in case they were needed.

I said that sounded like a lot of waiting around, and he said he didn't mind. It was his job.

The first night in our new apartment, I slept on a chair in the living room. I woke up in the middle of the night. Everyone else was sleeping soundly.

As I headed to the bathroom to get a drink, I was surprised when I heard the water running. I knocked, and when no one answered, I opened the door a crack.

Bubbles floated and danced. Steam billowed. But through the mist I could make out Crenshaw in the shower, fashioning a bubble beard.

“Do you have any purple jelly beans?” he asked.

Before I could answer, I felt my dad’s hand on my shoulder. “Jackson? You okay?”

I turned and hugged him hard. “I love you,” I said. “And that’s a fact.”

“I love you, too,” he whispered.

I smiled, recalling the question I’d been meaning to ask. “Dad,” I said, “have you ever known anyone by the name of Finian?”

“Did you say *Finian*?” he asked with a faraway look in his eyes.

PART THREE

I closed the bathroom door, and as I did, I caught another glimpse of Crenshaw. He was standing on his head. His tail was covered with bubbles.

I squeezed my eyes shut and counted to ten. Slowly.

Ten seconds seemed like the right amount of time for me to be sure he wasn't going to leave.

When I opened my eyes, Crenshaw was still there.

There had to be a logical explanation.

There's always a logical explanation.

Meantime, I was going to enjoy the magic while I could.