

double fudge



JUDY

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NEW
YORK
TIMES
BEST-SELLING
AUTHOR

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There's a new Fudge in town.

"No fair!" Fudge said. "You have to ask if you want to borrow something. Right, Dad?"

"That's how it's usually done," Dad agreed.

"Then, let's just say we're . . ." Flora began, looking at her sister.

"Copying your name," Fauna said.

"Copying?" Fudge asked.

"Yes," Flora said. "And copying is the highest form of flattery."

"If you want to copy you have to pay two million dollars," Fudge told them.

The Natural Beauties laughed. "Your brother's hilarious," Fauna told me.

"Don't you know the best things in life are free?" Flora asked Fudge.

As if that were some kind of cue, the Natural Beauties put their heads together, hummed a note, and the next thing I knew they started singing, right there in the middle of the gift shop.

*The moon belongs to everyone
The best things in life are free.
The stars belong to everyone
They gleam there for you and me. . . .*

I backed away, hoping to disappear into the crowd that had gathered around them. *This was worse than Fudge's tantrum at the shoe store. I never should have come to Washington. I should have stayed in New York with Grandma. Or gone to Jimmy Fargo's. Anything but this. Absolutely anything!*

~

"Fudge's inimitable antics and the characters' rousing repartee contribute to the sprightly clip of this cheerful read." —*Publishers Weekly*

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double fudge



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Judy BLUMME

*For my grandson Elliot,
who lights up my life*

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The Miser

When my brother Fudge was five, he discovered money in a big way. “Hey, Pete,” he said one night as I was getting out of the shower. “How much would it cost to buy New York?”

“The city or the state?” I asked, as if it were a serious question.

“Which is bigger?”

“The state, but all the good stuff is in the city.” People who don’t live in the city might disagree, but I’m a city kind of guy.

“We live in the city, right?” Fudge said. He was sitting on the open toilet seat in his pajamas.

“You’re not *doing* anything, are you?” I asked as I toweled myself dry.

“What do you mean, Pete?”

“I *mean* you’re sitting on the toilet, and you haven’t pulled down your pj’s.”

He swung his feet and started laughing. “Don’t worry, Pete. Only Tootsie still poops in her pants.” Tootsie is our little sister. She’ll be two in February.

Fudge watched as I combed my wet hair. “Are you going someplace?” he asked.

“Yeah, to bed.” I got into clean boxers and pulled a T-shirt over my head.

“Then how come you’re getting dressed?”

“I’m not getting dressed. Starting tonight, this is what I wear instead of pajamas. And how come you’re still up?”

“I can’t go to sleep until you tell me, Pete.”

“Tell you what?”

“How much it would cost to buy New York City.”

“Well, the Dutch paid about twenty-four dollars for it back in the sixteen hundreds.”

“Twenty-four dollars?” His eyes opened wide. “That’s all?”

“Yeah, it was a real bargain. But don’t get your hopes up. That’s not what it would cost today, even if it were for sale, which it’s not.”

“How do you know, Pete?”

“Believe me, I know!”

“But how?”

“Listen, Fudge . . . by the time you’re twelve there’s a lot of stuff you know, and you don’t even know how you know it.”

He repeated my line. “There’s a lot of stuff you know and you don’t even know how you know it!” Then he laughed like crazy. “That’s a tongue twister, Pete.”

“No, that’s just the truth, Fudge.”

* * *

The next day he was at it again. In the elevator he asked Sheila Tubman, “How much money do you have, Sheila?”

“That’s not a polite question, Fudgie,” she told him. “Nice people don’t talk about their money, especially in these times.” Sheila gave me a look like it was my fault my brother has no manners. I hope she’s not in my class this year. I hope that *every* year, and every year she’s there, like some kind of itch you can’t get rid of, no matter how hard you scratch.

“I’m nice,” Fudge said, “and I like to talk about money. You want to know how much I have?”

“No,” Sheila told him. “It’s nobody’s business but yours.”

He told her anyway. I knew he would. “I have fourteen dollars and seventy-four cents. I *mise* my money every night before I go to sleep.”

“You *mise* your money?” Sheila asked. Then she shook her head at me like it’s my fault he thinks *mise* is a word.

Henry, who runs the elevator in our building, laughed. “Nothing like having a miser in the family.”

“You don’t have to be a miser, Fudge,” Sheila said. “If you like counting money so much, you can work at a bank when you grow up.”

“Yeah,” Fudge said. “I can work at a bank and *mise* my money all day long.”

Sheila sighed. “He doesn’t get it,” she said to me.

“He’s only five,” I reminded her.

“Almost six,” he reminded me. Then he tugged Sheila’s arm. “Hey, Sheila . . . you know how much the Dude paid for New York City?”

“The Dude?” Sheila asked. “Is this some kind of joke?”

“Not the *Dude*,” I told Fudge. “The *Dutch*.”

“His name was Peter Minuit,” Sheila said, like the know-it-all she is. “And he paid the Wappinger Indian tribe in trinkets, not cash. Besides, the Indians thought they were going to share the land, not sell it.”

“Sharing is good,” Fudge said. “Except for money. I’ll never share my money. My money is all mine. I love my money!”

“That’s a disgusting thing to say,” Sheila told him. “You’re not going to have any friends if you talk that way.”

By then the elevator reached the lobby. “Your brother has no values,” Sheila said as we walked to the door of our building. Outside, she turned and headed toward Broadway.

“How much do *values* cost?” Fudge asked me.

“Not everything’s for sale,” I told him.

“It should be.” Then he skipped down to the corner singing, “*Money, money, money . . . I love money, money, money . . .*”

That’s when I knew we were in big trouble.

* * *

“It’s just a stage,” Mom told me later when I pointed out that Fudge is obsessed with money.

"Maybe, but it's still embarrassing," I said. "You better do something before school starts."

But Mom didn't take me seriously until that night at dinner when Dad said, "Please pass the salt, Fudge."

"How much will you give me for it?" Fudge asked. The saltshaker was sitting right in front of him.

"Excuse me," Dad said. "I'm asking for a favor, not hiring someone to do a job."

"If you hire me I'll pass the salt," Fudge said. "How about a dollar?"

"How about nothing?" I said, reaching for the salt and passing it to Dad.

"No fair, Pete!" Fudge shouted. "He asked me, not you."

"Thank you, Peter," Dad said and he and Mom shared a look.

"I told you, didn't I?" I said to them. "I told you we have a big problem."

"What problem?" Fudge asked.

"You!" I said.

"Foo!" Tootsie said from her baby seat, as she threw a handful of rice across the table.

* * *

"What's the difference between dollars and bucks?" Fudge asked the next morning at breakfast. He was drawing dollar signs all over the Cheerios box with a red marker.

"Bucks is just another word for dollars," Mom told him, moving the cereal box out of his reach.

"Nobody says *bucks* anymore," I said. "Where'd you hear about *bucks*?"

"Grandma was reading me a story and the guy called his money *bucks*," Fudge said. "He had five *bucks* and he thought that was a lot. Is that funny or what?" He shoveled a handful of dry Cheerios in his mouth, then washed them down with a swig of milk. He refuses to mix his cereal and milk in a bowl like everyone else.

"Five dollars is nothing to sneeze at," Dad said, carrying Tootsie into the kitchen. "I remember saving for a model airplane that cost four dollars and ninety-nine cents, and in those days that was a lot." Dad sat Tootsie in her baby seat and doled out some Cheerios for her. "Somebody's been decorating the cereal box," he said.

"Yeah . . . the miser's learned to draw dollar signs," I said.

It wasn't long before the miser started making his own money. "Fudge Bucks," he told us. "I'm going to make a hundred million trillion of them." And just like that, with one box of markers and a pack of colored paper, he was on his way. "Soon I'll have enough Fudge Bucks to buy the whole world."

"Why don't you start with something smaller," I suggested. "You don't want to buy the whole world right off because then you won't have anything to look forward to."

"Good idea, Pete. I'll start with Toys 'R' Us."

"The kid has no values," I told my parents after Fudge went to bed. They looked at me like I was some kind of crazy. "Well, he doesn't," I said. "He worships money."

"I wouldn't go that far," Dad said. "It's not unusual for young children to want things."

"I want things, too," I reminded Dad. "But I don't go around obsessing about money."

"It's just a phase," Mom said this time.

We could hear Fudge as he started to sing, "*Oh, money, money, money . . . I love money, money, money . . .*"

As soon as he stopped, Uncle Feather, his myna bird, started. "*Ooooo, money, money, money . . .*"

Turtle, my dog, lifted his head and howled. He thinks he can sing.

Dad called, "Fudge . . . cover Uncle Feather's cage and get to sleep."

~~"Uncle Feather's *missing* his money," Fudge called back. "He's not ready to go to sleep."~~

"How did this happen to us?" Mom asked. "We've always worked hard. We spend carefully. And we never talk about money in front of the children."

"Maybe that's the problem," I told them.



Shoes and News

A couple of days before school started we went to Harry's, the shoe store on Broadway. When he was three, Fudge only wanted to wear the same shoes as me. Now he has his own ideas. But this time he couldn't decide between black with silver trim or white with blue; between lace-ups, Velcro closings or pull-ons; between hi-tops or low. "I'll just get two pairs," he told Mom. "Maybe three." He licked his yellow lollipop, which he'd begged for before the salesman had even measured his feet.

"You need one pair of shoes and one pair of winter boots," Mom said, checking her list, "and unless you get going we won't have time to get your winter boots today."

There were at least a dozen open shoeboxes in front of Fudge, and the salesman—his name badge said *Mitch McCall*—kept checking his watch, like he was already late for some important appointment. Tootsie sat in her stroller kicking her feet, or maybe she was admiring her new shoes. Finally, I said to Fudge, "Why don't you just get the same shoes as me?"

"No thanks, Pete," Fudge said. "Your new shoes aren't that cool."

"What do you mean?" I asked, looking down at my feet.

"I mean *cool*, Pete."

"What's not cool about them?"

"Nothing's cool about them."

Could he be right? I wondered. Did I choose too fast just to be done with it? I do that sometimes. I can't help myself. I hate to shop. But are these shoes really that bad? Bad enough so the kids at school will laugh and say, "Nice shoes, Hatcher. Where'd you find them . . . in the trash?" Should I try on another pair? Should I wait to see what Fudge chooses and then . . . Wait a minute, I told myself. I can't believe I'm thinking this way, as if my five-year-old brother knows more about cool than me. Since when is he the expert on cool? Since when is he the expert on anything?

"Make up your mind," Mom told Fudge.

"I can't," Fudge said. He was wearing one style on his right foot and another on his left. "I have to have them both."

"I'll count to twenty," Mom said, "while you decide."

"I'm not deciding," Fudge told her.

"You want me to decide for you?" Mom asked.

"No!"

Tootsie mimicked him. "No!" Then she grabbed the yellow lollipop out of Fudge's hand and threw it. It hit Mitch McCall in the head, stuck to his hair, and hung there like an ornament on a Christmas

tree.

“Tootsie!” Mom cried. “That wasn’t polite.” But Tootsie laughed and clapped her sticky little hands anyway.

Mitch McCall grimaced as he pulled the lollipop off his head. It took some hairs with it, which really seemed to upset him, probably because he was already kind of bald on top.

“I’m so sorry,” Mom said, handing him a Wetwipe from her bag.

“Maybe you would prefer another salesperson,” Mitch McCall said, through teeth so tightly clenched his mouth hardly opened at all.

“No,” Mom said, “you’ve been very helpful.”

“All right then,” Mitch McCall said, kneeling in front of Fudge. “Let’s get this over with. Make up your mind, son. There are other customers waiting.”

“I’m *not* your son,” Fudge told him.

“That’s just a figure of speech,” Mom explained, quietly.

“A what?” Fudge asked.

“Never mind.” I could tell Mom was losing patience, too. “Just choose your shoes, Fudge.”

Fudge pulled a couple of Fudge Bucks out of his pocket. He handed them to Mitch McCall. “What’s this?” Mitch asked.

“Money,” Fudge said. “Enough for two pairs of shoes.”

“We don’t take play money.”

“It’s not play money,” Fudge told him. “It’s from the bank.”

“Bank?” Mitch McCall said. “What bank?”

“The Farley Drexel Hatcher Bank.” I was surprised to hear Fudge use his whole name. Usually he throws a fit when someone tries to call him *Farley Drexel* instead of Fudge. “It’s a big bank,” he continued. “It has zillions and trillions of Fudge Bucks.”

Mitch McCall turned to Mom. “Harry’s only accepts U.S. currency and valid credit cards.”

Mom dug her wallet out of her purse. “And I have my credit card right here,” she said, handing it to Mitch McCall. “We’ll take the black lace-ups with silver trim for Fudge and come back for his winter boots when you’re less crowded.”

“Make it on a Wednesday,” Mitch McCall said. Then he muttered under his breath, “That’s my day off.”

“But, Mom . . .” Fudge started.

“That’s it, Fudge,” Mom said. “We’re done shopping for shoes.”

“No fair!” Fudge cried.

“No feh!” Tootsie cried, as if she were Uncle Feather, repeating every word Fudge says.

“Let’s go,” Mom said.

“I’m not going without all my shoes!” Fudge said. He folded his arms across his chest and burrowed deeper into the chair.

Uh-oh, I thought, slowly backing away and out of the store. *This isn’t looking good*. Outside, I pretended to check out the window displays. But I could see Mom trying to pull Fudge off his chair. When that didn’t work, she tried to drag him by his feet. When *that* didn’t work she gave up, went to the register, picked up her bags, and pushed Tootsie’s stroller toward the door. She was probably thinking Fudge would follow. But she was wrong.

Suddenly he was whirling through the store like a tornado, destroying everything in his path. High heels flew off a display table. Baby shoes toppled from the shelves. Men’s boots thumped to the floor. Mom chased Fudge and Mitch McCall chased Mom. As the rotating sock display crashed, Tootsie jumped up and down in her stroller, shrieking, as if her nutcase of a brother was putting on the best show to hit Broadway in years.

I prayed no one from my class was at the store. No one who knows me or has ever known me. No one I might meet someday who would say, *Oh yeah . . . you're that kid with the weird brother who threw the fit at Harry's*. I backed away from the store windows and headed down the street, pretending I was just another guy strolling down Broadway—a guy from a perfectly normal family. I checked out the menu of the sushi restaurant two doors down from Harry's, browsed at the used-book table, and flipped through magazines at the newsstand on the corner. Then I heard Mom calling my name. "Peter . . . I could use some help here." She was carrying Tootsie in one arm, struggling with the shopping bags in the other, and still trying to push the stroller, which now held my screaming brother.

"You're too old for tantrums," I shouted.

"If Mom didn't love *you*, you'd have a tantrum," he cried.

"This has nothing to do with love," Mom said, passing Tootsie to me, then trying to get Fudge out of the stroller.

"Yes, it does," Fudge cried. "If you really loved me you would have bought me both pairs of shoes!"

"You don't need two pairs of the same shoes," Mom told him, as if she were talking to a reasonable person.

"They weren't the same."

"They were close enough."

"I wanted them," Fudge whined.

"I know you did. But we can't buy everything you want."

"Why?"

"We don't have the money to buy . . ." I could tell Mom was having a hard time explaining this. She thought for a minute before she finished. ". . . just for the sake of buying. Money doesn't grow on trees."

"I know it doesn't grow on trees," Fudge said. "You get it at the ATM."

"You can't just go to the ATM whenever you want money," Mom told him.

"Yes, you can," Fudge said. "You put in your card and money comes out. It works every time."

"No. You have to *deposit* money into your account first," Mom said. "You work hard and try to save part of your salary every week. The cash machine is just a way to get some of your money out of your account. It doesn't spit out money because you want it. It's not that easy."

"I know, Mom," Fudge said. "Sometimes you have to stand on line."

Mom sighed and looked at me. "Got any ideas, Peter?"

"Just tell him *no!* Stop trying to explain everything."

Mom looked surprised. "I never thought of that," she said. "I've always tried to explain things to my children."

"Maybe that worked with me," I said. "But Fudge is another story."

"Story?" Tootsie said.

"Not now," Mom told her.

Tootsie started to cry. "Story . . . now!"

* * *

When we got back to our building my best friend, Jimmy Fargo, was coming in with his father. They were loaded down with empty boxes.

"Have you told Peter the good news yet, Jimmy?" Mr. Fargo asked.

“What good news?” I said.

“Oops,” Mr. Fargo said. “Guess I let the cat out of the bag.”

“You got a cat?” Fudge asked.

“Meow?” Tootsie said. She has this animal alphabet book and every time she hears the name of an animal she makes an animal sound.

Mr. Fargo closed his eyes and shook his head. He always acts like he doesn’t get it when he’s around my family.

“I got new shoes,” Fudge told him.

“I see,” Mr. Fargo said, trying to get a look at Fudge’s feet over the boxes in his arms.

“No you don’t,” Fudge told him, “because my new shoes are in the bag.”

“Meow?” Tootsie asked.

“We’re not talking about cats,” Fudge told her. “We’re talking about shoes.”

Tootsie held up her foot. “Sue,” she said. She hasn’t learned to make the *sh* sound yet.

“Very nice,” Mr. Fargo told her.

“Well . . .” Mom said to Mr. Fargo, “I have to get these kids upstairs for lunch.”

“And I have to get started on these boxes,” Mr. Fargo told Mom.

“A new project?” Mom asked him.

“Oh yes,” Mr. Fargo said. “Very new.”

“I’ll be right there,” Jimmy told his dad. “I just have to talk to Peter.” Then he took my arm and led me outside.

“So what’s up?” I asked.

“What do you mean?”

“You *know* what I mean. That *cat out of the bag* stuff.”

“Oh, that,” Jimmy said.

“Yeah, that.” Whatever it was, I could tell he didn’t want to talk about it. So I changed the subject.

“You think these shoes are dorky?” I asked.

Jimmy checked them out. “They look okay to me. Why?”

“Because . . .” I shook my head and stopped. I wasn’t about to say *because Fudge said they were*.

“So what’s the good news?” I asked again. He’d have to tell me sooner or later.

“You know my father’s got a show coming up, right?” he said.

“Yeah . . .” Frank Fargo’s an artist. And all of a sudden his paintings are starting to sell.

“So he needs a bigger place to paint,” Jimmy said.

“Yeah . . . so?”

“So he got this loft down in SoHo and . . .” Jimmy stopped and took a long look at my shoes. “You know . . . maybe they are dorky. Where’d you get them?”

“Harry’s.”

“Let’s see the bottoms.”

I raised one foot to show Jimmy the bottom of my new shoe.

“I guess they’re okay,” he said. “Anyway, they won’t take them back now, ’cause you already wore them in the street.”

“Could we get back to the *news*?”

“Oh, right . . . the news.” But he kept looking at my shoes. “How much were they?” he asked. “I need new shoes before school starts.”

“I’ll sell you these at a slight discount.”

“I don’t think we wear the same size anymore. Besides, if you think they’re dorky, why would I want them?”

“They’re not dorky.”

"Then how come you asked if I thought they were?"

"I'm done talking about these shoes, Jimmy, okay?"

"Okay. Fine. Probably nobody will even notice them."

"What do you mean?"

"Gotcha!" he said, sticking a finger in my gut and laughing. I hate when he does that.

I started back to our building. "I'm going up for lunch."

"Good idea," Jimmy said. "I'm starving. What are you having?"

"I don't know. Peanut butter, probably. So are you going to tell me or not?"

"Tell you what?"

"Whatever it is you don't want to tell me!"

"Oh, that . . ."

I waited while Jimmy looked up at the sky, then down at the ground, then back at the sky. Finally he took a deep breath and said, "I might as well get it over with because sooner or later you're going to find out anyway. Probably sooner since it's happening on Saturday."

"What's happening on Saturday?"

"You know that artist's loft I told you about . . . where my dad's going to paint?"

"What about it?"

"We're going to live there."

"What do you mean *live* there?"

"We're moving to SoHo on Saturday."

"What do you mean *moving*?"

"Come on, Peter. You know what *moving* means."

I kept shaking my head. It couldn't be true. It was just one of his jokes. Any second he'd poke me again and say *Gotcha!*

"But I'm still coming up here to go to school," he said. "So we'll still see each other every day."

"What are you talking about? SoHo's like sixty or seventy blocks away."

"I didn't say I was going to walk. I'm going to take the subway."

"You're going to take the subway to school every day?" I asked. "By yourself?"

"What's the big deal? Plenty of kids in seventh grade take the subway by themselves."

I swallowed hard. I didn't know what the big deal was except I felt like I'd been punched in the gut for real and this time I felt like punching back. "Why'd your father have to go and get a place way downtown?"

"That's where the lofts are. You have to be an artist to get one. Besides, our apartment is too small. It's always been too small."

"You didn't used to think it was too small. One time you even invited me to move in."

"We were younger then," Jimmy said. "I didn't know as much as I know now."

"Just because your father's getting rich . . ." I began.

Jimmy didn't wait for me to finish. "That's a really rude thing to say. He's not rich and you know it."

"What's rude about having plenty of money?"

"He doesn't have plenty of money. He'll probably never have plenty of money."

"Why are you acting like it's bad to have money?" I said.

"I don't know what it's like to have money, okay? All I know is my father got this loft downtown and we're moving in. It's not like we're leaving the city the way you did."

"That was just for one school year," I argued. It's true we spent last year in New Jersey. In Princeton, to be exact. Because my parents wanted to check out living outside the city. It was okay. But when school ended we decided to come back. Jimmy was so glad we celebrated for a week.

“Besides,” I told him, “I didn’t have any choice about that.”

~~“You think I have a choice?” Jimmy asked. “But to tell you the truth, I don’t mind leaving.”~~

“Thanks a lot.”

“I’m not talking about leaving *you*,” Jimmy said. “I’m talking about leaving an ant-sized apartment with no furniture. I’m tired of sleeping on a mat on the floor inches away from my father’s face. I’m tired of smelling his salami and onion burps all night. I need my own space.”

I looked away.

“Are you trying to make me feel bad?” Jimmy asked. “Because you’re doing a pretty good job of it.”

I didn’t answer. I couldn’t.

“Look . . .” he said, “you’ll come down. We’ll hang out. It’ll be cool. Nothing’s going to change.”

* * *

“What’s wrong, Pete?” Fudge asked when I went upstairs for lunch.

“What do you mean?”

“You look like you just lost your best friend.”

“Where’d you learn that expression . . . from Grandma?” Grandma has an expression to fit every situation.

Fudge nodded. “So, did you?”

“Did I *what*?”

“Lose your best friend?”

“I just found out Jimmy’s moving down to SoHo.”

Mom put a peanut butter sandwich in front of me. “Frank Fargo told me. It’s really good news for them, Peter.” She put an arm around my shoulder. “I know it’s going to be hard to say good-bye to Jimmy but . . .”

“I’m *not* saying good-bye to Jimmy! Didn’t Mr. Fargo tell you? He’s still going to school with me. He’s going to take the subway up here every day.”

“Is SoHo like Princeton?” Fudge asked.

“Princeton’s in New Jersey, Turkey Brain.”

“SoHo is part of the city,” Mom told Fudge. “You’ve been there.”

“So . . . ho ho ho,” Tootsie said, sounding like some miniature Santa.

Mom was impressed. “That’s right. SoHo.”

“I hate SoHo!” I shouted. Then I ran for my room and slammed the door and when I did, Tootsie started bawling.

“Thanks a lot, Pete,” Fudge called. “Everybody was happy ’til you got home!”



Who's Mixed Up?

The minute Jimmy and his father moved out of our building, Henry started painting their apartment and fixing up the old kitchen. Lucky for the new people he did, because Frank Fargo never cleaned out his refrigerator. He kept everything until it turned green with mold and so smelly you nearly fell over when the door opened.

The new people have a kid Fudge's age. We met in the lobby the afternoon before school started. "I'm Melissa Beth Miller and I'm in mixed-up group," she announced. She had kid tattoos plastered up and down her arms.

"I'm in mixed-up group, too," Fudge told her.

"It's not mixed-up group," Mom said. "It's mixed group."

What does that mean? I wondered. *And how come this is the first I'm hearing about it?*

"That's a relief," Melissa's mother said. "We're new here and when we got Melissa's school assignment I was very concerned."

By then, Tootsie had fallen asleep in her stroller. She was barefooted and Turtle started licking her toes. I don't know what it is about toes but all of a sudden he's an addict. It's like he can't help himself. Baby toes, old people's toes, clean toes, disgusting toes. As soon as he sees a set of toes he's at it—sniffing, nibbling, licking. I'm hoping he'll forget about toes once it's winter and nobody's walking around in sandals.

The second I let go of his leash to fish our mail out of the box, Turtle took off. By the time I looked up, he was across the lobby, sniffing Olivia Osterman's big toe. It was the only one sticking out of her open-toed shoe. Mrs. Osterman spends a lot of time in the lobby, sitting on the leather sofa, watching people come and go. She's lived in our building longer than anyone—more than sixty years. She's close to ninety now. When she was younger she was a Broadway star. Grandma saw her perform. She still dresses up every day, wearing big hats and lots of jewelry. Everyone in the building knows her and stops to talk. She hands out little boxes of raisins to the kids, as if every day were Halloween. She carries dog biscuits, too, so all the dogs in the building are her friends.

The only problem is, she doesn't get why I named my dog *Turtle*. I've explained a million times that I had a tiny pet turtle and when my brother was three he swallowed him. So when I got a dog, I named him after my turtle. It makes perfect sense to everyone but Mrs. Osterman. "A turtle is a turtle," she says. "A dog is a dog. Would you name your cat *Monkey*, or your monkey *Kangaroo*?" I never know how to answer that question.

I was so busy thinking about Mrs. Osterman I didn't notice Mom, who was chasing half a dozen

apples that had tumbled out of our grocery bag. Sometimes Mom tells me I'm just like Dad, that I don't notice what's going on right under my nose.

By then, Fudge and Melissa were racing around the lobby, laughing and screaming. "Fudge," Mom called. "You know you're not supposed to run in the lobby."

"Melissa," Mrs. Miller called, "come over here, please."

Mom laughed. "Welcome to our building," she said to Mrs. Miller. "It's not always this chaotic." *Right, I thought, sometimes it's worse.*

When Fudge came back and heard Mrs. Miller telling Mom she worked at the Social Services program at Roosevelt Hospital, he asked, "How much do you make?"

"Excuse me?" Mrs. Miller said, as if she couldn't possibly have heard what she thought she heard.

"Fudge," Mom said, "that's not a polite question." She shook her head at Mrs. Miller. "My son isn't usually so rude."

Oh yeah . . . he is, I thought.

"I don't get why grown-ups don't like to talk about money," Fudge said to Melissa.

"Because they're grown-ups," Melissa said. "That's why."

Mom and Mrs. Miller half-laughed the way parents do when they're embarrassed but don't want to admit it. Then they exchanged business cards. "I'm a dental hygienist," Mom said.

"We could use a good dentist," Mrs. Miller said, reading Mom's card aloud. "*Dr. Martha Julie.*"

"The dentist with two first names," Fudge sang, hopping around Melissa. "You get to watch videos while she's checking your teeth."

"Which ones?" Melissa asked.

"Whichever ones you want. But she doesn't like it when you laugh hard, so don't bring anything too funny."

"Funny is the best," Melissa said.

"I know," Fudge agreed.

"I'll call to set up an appointment," Mrs. Miller told Mom.

"I'm there Tuesdays, Fridays, and every other Saturday," Mom said. She picked up our grocery bags. "See you soon."

As I pushed Tootsie in her stroller, Mom tried to guide Fudge toward the elevator but he pulled back. "Guess what?" he called to Melissa. "Pete's best friend lived in your apartment. They didn't have any beds."

"That's because his father thought it was better to sleep on the floor," I said. I don't know why I thought I had to defend Frank Fargo, but I did.

"I have a bed," Melissa said. "Want to see it?" she asked.

"Can I, Mom?" Fudge said.

"Some other time," Mom said. "We have a lot to do to get ready for school."

Melissa walked us to the elevator. "See you in mixed-up group," she told Fudge.

"Mixed-up group for mixed-up kids!" Fudge sang, giving her a high five.

* * *

All through dinner I wondered if Fudge was really going into a class for mixed-up kids. Later, while Mom was getting Tootsie ready for bed, I decided to find out. "So what's with this mixed-up group thing?"

"It's called *mixed group*," Mom told me.

“Look, Mom . . . if he’s repeating kindergarten you can tell me. I won’t let the cat out of the bag.”

“Meow,” Tootsie said, as Mom changed her diaper.

“He’s *not* repeating kindergarten,” Mom said. “You know he’s very smart.”

“But he says his class is for *mixed-up* kids.”

“I can’t imagine where he got that idea,” Mom said, looking at me. “Peter, you didn’t suggest . . .”

“No way, Mom.”

“Because this is an accelerated program. All the children are ready to read and write. They’re just not old enough for official first grade. You know how smart Fudge is. You know he’s very mature for his age.”

I laughed. So did Tootsie, even though she didn’t have a clue what we were talking about.

“He *is*, Peter!”

“Sure, Mom. If you say so.”

“His self-esteem is at stake here. He should be proud to be in mixed group.”

“I don’t think you have to worry about his self-esteem. He thinks he’s the greatest.”

“Not if he’s got the idea he’s going into a class for mixed-up children.”

“What happens if he gets another Rat Face?” I asked. Rat Face was his kindergarten teacher last year, when we lived in Princeton. When she refused to call him Fudge he kicked her. In less than an hour he had to be transferred to another class.

“I’ve met the teaching team and they seem very nice. Fudge will be in William’s section. This is his third year with mixed group. So he has some experience.”

“Nobody has enough experience for Fudge,” I said.

“Let’s try to have a positive attitude, Peter. Okay?”

“I am positive . . .” *Positive it’ll be a disaster, just like it always is with Fudge.*



Richie Richest

I admit I was worried about my first day of seventh grade. I wondered if I'd be considered a new kid because I wasn't there last year, to start middle school with everyone else. But how can you be a new kid when you've only missed one year? I'd be more like a new *old* kid, wouldn't I? I mean, I wouldn't know everyone at middle school but I'd know all the kids who'd been in fifth grade with me. And I'd still have the same best friend.

Fudge didn't seem at all worried about starting a new school. He and Melissa skipped all the way there. I wish Jimmy still lived in our building so we could walk to school together. Instead I walked with Sheila Tubman. Not that I wanted to but what choice did I have? We went down in the elevator together. It would have been rude to cross the street just to avoid her, right? I was still hoping we wouldn't be in the same homeroom or any of the same classes.

* * *

The bad news is, Sheila's in my homeroom. She's in my science class and Spanish, too. But I'm trying to keep a positive attitude, like Mom said. The good news is, Jimmy's also in my homeroom and better yet, in my humanities section. We even have the same lunch period. And nobody at school acts like I was a new kid. Most kids either didn't remember I lived someplace else last year, or didn't care.

After school Jimmy came over, same as always. I told him about Melissa and her mother and how Henry painted the apartment and fixed up the kitchen. "They got a new refrigerator," I said, expecting Jimmy to laugh and make some joke about salami and onion sandwiches. But he didn't.

We hung out in the park for a while—at the top of our special rock—then, just like that, Jimmy said he had to go home. I forgot for a minute he'd moved, that he lived downtown now, that he had to take the subway home by himself. I walked him to Central Park West and Seventy-second Street.

Jimmy and I have been best friends since third grade. He lived around the corner then. It was the first place in the city I was allowed to walk by myself. I really liked Jimmy's mom. She told me to call her Anita, not Mrs. Fargo. We had this special game. Every time I left her house she gave me a graham cracker, in case I got hungry on the way home. That was a big joke since it took about two minutes to get to my building. I was so mad at her when she took off for Vermont, leaving Jimmy with his dad. But then I was happy when Jimmy and his dad moved into our building. Then I was mad at

her again, because Jimmy was.

~~Jimmy still doesn't like to talk about the divorce or his mother. He keeps everything to himself. He visits her at Christmas and for a month in the summer. I hope I never see her again because if I do, I'll tell her exactly what I think about what she did to Jimmy. And don't tell me there are two sides to every story, like Mom does, because I've seen Jimmy's side up close. Not that I want him to move to Vermont. That would be a lot worse than SoHo. I'd never get to see him then. Now I know how he felt when I left the city last year.~~

I watched as Jimmy disappeared down the stairs into the subway station. I wonder when Mom and Dad will let me take the subway to SoHo on my own?

* * *

That night at dinner, Fudge went on and on about his first day of school. "I have two teachers in my room, William and Polly. And a library helper. That makes three."

"You need three teachers," I said, "maybe more."

"Because I'm smart, right?"

"Oh yeah . . . they don't come any smarter than you."

"How many teachers do you have, Pete?"

"A different one every hour."

"Wow . . . you're *really* smart."

Dad said, "When you're in seventh grade you'll have as many teachers as Peter."

"My library helper comes two times every week," Fudge said. "He's seventeen. Next year he's going to college. Know what his name is? Jonathan Girdle."

I laughed and said, "You probably got that wrong, Turkey Brain."

"Peter!" Mom said. "What did we discuss last night?"

"Uh . . . I don't know."

"Self-esteem," Mom said. "Don't you remember?"

"What's that got to do with . . ." I stopped before I finished. Was she talking about me calling Fudge *Turkey Brain*? Mom nodded like she could read my mind.

But Fudge didn't pay any attention. He went on as if he were the only one at the table. "Jonathan told us some people think his name is funny, so I told him some people think *my* name is funny. Then this girl named Rebecca Noodle said a lot of people think *her* name is funny. Then Pluto Stevenson said *everybody* thinks his name is funny."

"*Pluto*?" I said.

"Yes, Pluto. But he's not my new best friend. My new best friend is . . ."

"Wait a minute," I said, interrupting. "One day of school and you have a new best friend?"

"Yeah, Pete. I do."

* * *

I have to hand it to Fudge. He always manages to find a friend. He never worries like I do, when I go someplace new, that maybe no one will like him. "Guess what my new best friend's name is?" Fudge asked later that night. I was at my desk. I'd just finished my math homework and was about to start on Spanish. We're having a vocabulary quiz on Friday.

"I'm doing my homework," I told him. "You're not supposed to bother me while I'm studying. And you're supposed to knock if my door is closed." Fudge and I each have half a bedroom. There's a divider wall with shelves between us. But we have our own doors to the hallway.

"I brought you a rice cake," Fudge said in his best-little-boy-in-the-world voice. He held it out to me.

He's the one who loves rice cakes, not me. They make me gag. They're like eating cardboard. "I don't want a rice cake," I told him. "You know how I feel about rice cakes. Anyway, aren't you supposed to be in bed?"

"I can't go to bed until you guess," he said, nibbling at the rice cake himself.

"Okay . . . what am I supposed to guess this time?"

"Pay attention, Pete!" he said. "You're supposed to guess my new friend's name."

"If you want me to guess, you have to give me a clue," I told him.

"Okay . . . his first name is what I want to be when I grow up."

"King?" I guessed.

"Wrong!"

"President?"

"Very funny, Pete. Try again."

"Let's see . . ." I pretended to think about it. "Oh, I've got it. *Miser?*"

"No!" He shoved half the rice cake into his mouth at once. "It's Rich." He waited for my reaction. When I didn't say anything he repeated, "His name is *Rich*. Get it, Pete? It's what I want to be when I grow up!" When I still didn't say anything, he added, "We call him Richie. And his last name is even better. Here's a clue. He's related to someone very famous. Someone we know." He stuffed the rest of the rice cake into his mouth and brushed off his hands. The crumbs landed on my *Living Spanish* textbook.

"I don't know anyone really famous."

"Yes you do."

"I give up."

Fudge whispered in my ear. "He's *You-Know-Who's* cousin."

"We've been through this before," I told him, wiping off my ear. "Harry Potter isn't real. He's a . . ."

But before I could finish Fudge spit on the back of his hand three times. "You said his name out loud? You have to spit three times or something terrible will happen. Hurry!" He spit on the back of his other hand. I don't know why Fudge thinks you're not supposed to say the name Harry Potter out loud, but he does. It's some kind of magic he invented. I knew he was too young to listen to the book on tape but Mom and Dad played it anyway, driving back from summer vacation. To tell the truth, it's easier to spit than argue with him. So I did. Three times on the back of my hand.

"Whew . . ." Fudge said. "That was a close one."

"I hate to break it to you," I told him, "but Potter's a common name. I know at least two kids at school whose last name is Potter. It doesn't mean anything."

"You are so wrong, Pete!"

Uncle Feather agreed with Fudge. "*You are so wrong, Pete . . . so wrong wrong wrong.*"

"Cover Bird Brain's cage, will you?" I said. "I can't concentrate on my homework with him yakking."

"*Yak yak yak . . .*" Uncle Feather said.

I reached for my headset and turned up the volume. Sometimes I wonder how I ever survived without it.

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