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THE KARATE KID

It all started when Gilbert's older cousin Raymundo brought over *The Karate Kid* on video. Never before had a message been so clear, never had Gilbert seen his life on TV. As he sat in the dark with a box of Cracker Jacks in his lap, he knew that *he*, Gilbert Sanchez, a fifth-grader at John Burroughs Elementary, was the Karate Kid. Like the kid on the screen, he was pushed around by bullies. He too was a polite kid who did his homework and kept to himself. And, like the kid in the movie, Gilbert wanted to be strong enough to handle anyone who tried to mess with him.

Inspired, Gilbert and Raymundo kicked and chopped imaginary opponents into submission as they walked to the 7-Eleven for a Sturpee.

"The *ninjas* are after us," Gilbert whispered in an alley.

"So what? They can't mess with us. We're cousins. If they mess with you, they mess with me. If they mess with me, they mess with you."

"That's right. We're bad." Gilbert chopped a *ninja* in the neck. "Take that. And that! And give some to your brother."

They climbed on the hood of a wrecked car and stood storklike on one leg, just like in the movie. But instead of crashing sea for a backdrop, there was a dilapidated barrio of ramshackle houses and dusty cars.

Gilbert's courage carried over to the next day. At school, Pete the Heat cut in front of Gilbert while he was in line for lunch. Gilbert looked at him and said, "Hey, the line starts back there."

Pete the Heat, a not-so-bright fourth-grader, was a tough playground fighter who could thump with the big kids.

"What did you say?" asked the Heat. His fists were doubled up and trembling like small animals. He stuck his face into Gilbert's face.

"I said I'm not letting you cut in front of me. Get in back!"

"No, you watch it!"

"I'm not telling you again!" Gilbert doubled his fists and leaned his body into the Heat. He was surprised by his own aggressiveness.

"I'll meet you on the playground," the Heat said, jabbing a finger into Gilbert's chest.

"Any place, any time," Gilbert, to his great surprise,

shouted at the Heat, who cut in closer to the front of the line. Raymundo came up to Gilbert.

"Why did you do that? You know he's a dirty fighter."

"'Cause," Gilbert said with a faraway look on his face. He was busy picturing himself getting beat up by the Heat.

"You're going to get it," Raymundo warned. "Why did you talk so big, *menso*?"

"Don't worry about it," Gilbert said as he left the line in a daze. He wasn't hungry anymore; he was gorged on fear. Would it hurt much to get smacked in the face lots of times? he wondered. Would he have enough blood left in his body to walk to the principal's office?

Raymundo sat down next to him. He was older than Gilbert and could beat up the Heat, but he knew he shouldn't get involved. It was Gilbert's fight.

"Remember," Raymundo advised, "Chop and kick. Look tough, too."

They met on the playground. Kids closed in to see the fight. Out of the corner of his eye, Gilbert saw Patricia, the girl he liked to think was his girlfriend, walking toward them. Oh no, he thought to himself, she's going to see me get beat up. He wished now that he had let the Heat cut in line.

The Heat said, "What about it, creep! You still think you're bad?"

"Yeah," Gilbert growled. He tried to take Raymundo's advice and sound tough, but his mind had melted into a puddle of misfiring cells. But he wasn't so far gone that he couldn't remember to stand like a stork and flap his arms.

"Just 'cause you seen that *Karate Kid* you think you're

bad, huh? You ain't *bad*," the Heat taunted. Some of the older kids encouraged the Heat to get on with it.

Again Gilbert tried to sound tough. "Come and get me. If you think you're—"

Gilbert never finished his sentence. The Heat caught him with a roundhouse punch to the jaw, sending Gilbert to the ground. The Heat jumped on Gilbert and smacked him a few more times before Raymundo pulled him off.

"That's enough, Heat. Leave him alone."

Gilbert didn't bother to move. A few kids taunted him, called him "sissy," "pushover," and "wimp," but Gilbert stayed on the ground with his eyes closed, waiting for all of them to go away.

Finally, he opened an eye and, seeing that everyone, including Raymundo, had disappeared, rose up on one elbow. How come it didn't work? he asked himself. I stood like a stork, just like in the movie.

Even though it was a school night, Gilbert convinced his mother to let him borrow Raymundo's *Karate Kid* a second time. This time he watched intently, with no Cracker Jacks to distract him. Yes, his school was like the school in the movie, full of bullies. And yes, he had stood like a stork and flapped his arms. But, unlike the kid in the movie, he was smacked to the ground. The missing component struck him like a hammer. He didn't have a teacher, and the kid in the movie did. So that's it, he thought. I need a master to teach me karate.

Gilbert stayed home the next day, feigning sickness, and looked through the *Yellow Pages* for a karate school. It was very confusing. There were so many styles: Shotokan, Taekwon-Do, Kajukenbo, Bok-Fu, Jujitsu, Kung Fu. That

one sounded familiar, but it was in north Fresno, far from his home. It would take him forever to bicycle up there.

Finally he decided to call the Shotokan school that was around the corner from his house. He got a recorded message that gave the hours, which were from 3:30 in the afternoon to 7:00 P.M. Gilbert decided to practice standing like a stork until the studio opened. By 3:30 he was exhausted and bored, but he still hopped on his bike and rode over to the studio. The instructor, to Gilbert's surprise, was Mexican, not Japanese like the guy in the movie.

The instructor flipped the sign in the window from Closed to Open and looked at Gilbert. "Hey, kid, what's up?"

He called me "kid," Gilbert thought. I wonder how he knew. Do I look like the boy in the movie?

"You wanna take lessons?"

"Yeah."

"You have to be real serious."

"I will, I promise."

"It's twenty-five a month, and fifteen for the uniform."

The instructor let Gilbert in and watched him look around the *dojo*, which was small, dark, and smelly. It held nothing but some mirrors, a punching bag, and a shopping cart full of what looked like boxing gloves.

"And there's an introductory price. Two months for the price of one. Stick around, kid, you look like you'll be good." The instructor bowed at the edge of the wooden karate floor, and walked behind a curtain. After a few minutes he came out wearing his uniform, and all that Gilbert could think was *He's got a black belt*.

Three noisy kids came in clutching grocery bags con-

taining their uniforms. The instructor told them to be quiet, but they ignored him. They took off their shoes but didn't bow the way the instructor bowed when he stepped onto the wooden floor. Gilbert didn't like them because of their rudeness. They were not like the kid in the movie.

Four older kids came in and joined the other kids, who were playing tag. Finally, the instructor clapped his hands together and shouted for them to line up. When one kid whined, "Aw, man," the instructor glared fiercely at him.

"Come on, let's show some respect," he growled.

The kids wiped their sweaty faces on their wrinkled uniforms. As they lined up, one kid pushed another kid, who fell on the ground and pretended to cry. The instructor, pinching his brow into dark lines of disgust, told them to show respect.

The class started with jumping jacks, and even though the instructor told them to stay with the count, the kids jumped as they pleased. He told them to do push-ups, and everyone groaned. Then they sat against the wall to stretch.

Gilbert was in awe. All but two of the seven kids had yellow belts. One had a green belt, and the other wore a white belt with what looked like a piece of black electrical tape on the end.

That night, during dinner, he asked his mother if he could take karate. His mother wiped her mouth and said, "No."

He was ready for this answer, ready for a battle. "How come? It's only twenty-five dollars a month."

"Because you don't need it," his mother said. "You won't learn anything you can use later in life. School is more important."

"Yeah, if you don't get beat up every day."

"What do you mean?" his mother asked.

"I got beat up yesterday by Pete the Heat. That's why I stayed home today."

"Why didn't you say anything?"

"What could you do? You're at work, and I'm at school. You can't hold my hand at recess."

"Don't get smart."

"But it's true. You don't know what it's like."

His mother knew it was true. She stared at her salad and remembered when her parents wouldn't let her take ballet lessons. No matter how much she cried her parents said the same thing: "No, you don't need to." She looked at Gilbert, whose face shone with hope, and asked, "How much are the lessons?"

"Twenty-five dollars. It's cheaper than most places," he said. "And I need a uniform."

She looked at her son's beaming face. "Maybe it'll be good for you," she said.

"I'll train really hard, and then you can call me the Karate Kid." Gilbert ate all his food and washed the dishes without his mother having to ask.

That night he had wild and strange dreams about the whole school watching him pepper the Heat with karate chops and punches. Only when the Heat cried, "No more," did he let up. Then out of kindness and mercy, Gilbert led him to the boys' restroom to wash his bruised face.

Gilbert began his lessons the next day. He was scared of the kids in the yellow belts, though he was as old and tall as most of them.

When Mr. Lopez asked them to bow so they could

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begin class, only a few gave courtesy bows. The others nodded their heads or wiped their noses on the backs of their sleeves. Their uniforms were dirty, and their belts were just one wiggle away from coming untied.

"OK, let's do thirty-five jumping jacks," Mr. Lopez commanded.

The kids groaned but started their jumping jacks, out of count with the instructor's. They then did two sets of fifteen push-ups. Again, the kids were out of count and complained that it was too hard.

Gilbert tried to keep up with the instructor but pulled a muscle in his shoulder while doing push-ups. He groaned and said, "Mr. Lopez, my shoulder hurts. Is it supposed to?"

The instructor wrinkled his brow. "You too? The first day of class and you're like the others?"

This made Gilbert try harder. But when it was time to do basic drills, he was at a loss. He looked out of the corner of his eye and saw the other kids moving their arms in patterns. Now and then the instructor would pause long enough to correct Gilbert's mistakes, but most of the time he ignored him and the other boys and gazed out the window at the cars and people passing by.

Next they did kicks—front snap kick, roundhouse kick, side kick—and toward the end of the class the advanced students, those with colored belts, did *katas*. Gilbert sat cross-legged against the wall in awe. But the instructor stood with his hands on his hips, displeased with their technique. He didn't have to say anything, the message was clear.

They ended the class with more jumping jacks and push-ups. The students then "bowed out" and grumbled

that it had been the hardest workout in the whole world. Gilbert added a few complaints. His shoulder was sore, and the bottoms of his feet were blistered from the wooden floor. He rode home slowly, with his rolled-up uniform under his arm.

At dinner, his mother, who was secretly pleased that her son was taking karate, asked about his first lesson.

"It was kinda hard," he said, "and I was kinda confused."

Gilbert stood up and did some blocks. He was going to do a front snap kick, but his mother told him to sit down and eat his food before it got cold.

"My feet got some blisters because we practice on a wooden floor." He wanted to show his mother but knew it was impolite to show the bottoms of your feet while someone was eating.

The next week it was pretty much the same thing, jumping jacks and push-ups, stretches that hurt, blocks and kicks, and *katas* at the end of the class.

Gilbert wanted to ask the instructor when he'd get to stand like a stork, the way the Karate Kid did in the movie, but he couldn't catch his eye. Mr. Lopez had a faraway look in his eyes and seemed more interested in watching the people outside than his students.

By the end of the month, Gilbert was bored to tears. Every day it was the same thing. They didn't learn one thing that would protect them from other kids. The instructor himself began to show up late, and even when he was there he didn't bother to correct the students' kicks or blocks. He just walked around the *dojo* with his hands on his hips.

Gilbert wanted to quit, but his mother had paid his

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dues for the third and fourth months. When she asked, "How are your lessons? You must be very strong, no?" Gilbert pretended that everything was great and rolled up his shirt sleeve to show off his biceps.

But karate was no fun; it was boring and didn't do him any good. One day at school when Pete the Heat tried to cut in front of Gilbert in the cafeteria line, Gilbert, still convinced in his heart that he was the Karate Kid, shoved him away.

"Didn't I beat you up already?" the Heat taunted.

"You better watch it, Heat. I'm taking karate."

Pete shoved Gilbert and said, "See you on the playground."

Outside, in front of the fifth- and sixth-grade boys, Gilbert assumed a karate stance. The Heat snickered that nothing could save him but the U.S. Army and socked Gilbert in the jaw. The blow sent Gilbert to the ground, where he stayed with his eyes closed until recess was over.

Gilbert was too embarrassed to tell his mother that he wanted to quit karate. She was sure to yell at him. She would say that she wasted over a hundred dollars on karate lessons, that Gilbert was lazy, and, worst of all, that he was scared of the other boys in the class.

Gilbert became as sloppy as the other kids. He went six months, week after week, and advanced to yellow belt, which made him feel proud for a few days. Then it was back to the same routine of sloppiness and the boredom of push-ups and sit-ups, stretching, blocks, kicks, and *katas*. Not once did they spar.

He fantasized about sparring the Heat while Mr. Lopez watched, arms folded over his chest. Gilbert saw himself

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circle and feint, and he saw the Heat cower and shy away from his blows. But, more often, Gilbert fantasized about quitting. He saw himself fall off his bike and break his leg, or fall off a roof and break his neck. With such injuries no one would taunt him for being a sissy because he couldn't stick it out.

How am I going to tell her? he wondered on the day he decided to quit because it was too boring. Maybe he could tell his mom that the monthly dues were now a hundred a month. Or that he knew enough karate to defend himself. He thought of excuses as he pushed a broom around the karate floor. He looked up and saw his instructor doing a *kata*. The first time he had seen Mr. Lopez perform one he thought he was the strongest man in the entire world. Now he only looked OK. Gilbert figured that anyone who sweated so much couldn't be that good, and the instructor was sweating buckets.

At school the Heat teased Gilbert, saying, "Hey, Karate Kid, let's see what you can do. I bet you can't even whip my sister." It was true. His sister was in Gilbert's grade, and she was as nasty as a cat in a sack.

One day the instructor came in smiling. It was the first time Gilbert had seen his teeth. "I have news for you," he said as the kids lined up. "But not now. Let's practice. Quit fooling around! Line up!" As they did their drill, Gilbert began to smile along with the instructor. I guess this is the day, he thought. Finally we'll get to spar. For months he had obeyed the instructor's yells, and now he and the better-behaved kids were going to get their chance. Gilbert looked at the shopping cart of sparring equipment. He couldn't wait for the instructor to tell them to get the gear.

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But the class followed the usual routine. They went up and down the line doing blocks, kicks, and the same. Then the instructor yelled for the kids to fall in line. After hushing them five times, he announced that he was closing the *dojo*. Business had been bad, and he didn't see how he could continue with only twelve students.

"There's nothing I can do," he said, trying to look sad. "Business is business. I'm sorry."

Only one student moaned. The others cheered.

"No respect," muttered the instructor. He yanked on his belt and pointed to the dressing room. "Go! You're terrible kids." The students raced around the *dojo*, laughing and roughhousing, before they changed to their street clothes. They all waved a casual goodbye to the instructor, who was standing at the front window watching the traffic pass.

During dinner that night a smiling and very happy Gilbert told his mom that the studio was closing.

"That's too bad for Mr. Lopez and you kids." His mother was disappointed and, after eating in silence, suggested that Gilbert go to another studio for lessons.

"Oh, no," Gilbert said. "I think I've learned enough to protect myself."

"Well, I don't want to hear about you getting beat up."

"You won't," he promised. And she never did.

Gilbert threw the uniform in the back of his closet and soon forgot his *katas*. When *Karate Kid, Part Two* came to the theater that summer, Raymundo had to see it alone. Gilbert stayed home to read super-hero comic books; they were more real than karate. And they didn't hurt.

LA BAMBA

Manuel was the fourth of seven children and looked like a lot of kids in his neighborhood: black hair, brown face, and skinny legs scuffed from summer play. But summer was giving way to fall: the trees were turning red, the lawns brown, and the pomegranate trees were heavy with fruit. Manuel walked to school in the frosty morning, kicking leaves and thinking of tomorrow's talent show. He was still amazed that he had volunteered. He was going to pretend to sing Ritchie Valens's "La Bamba" before the entire school.

Why did I raise my hand? he asked himself, but in his heart he knew the answer. He yearned for the limelight. He wanted applause as loud as a thunderstorm, and to hear his



Shells

"You hate living here."

Michael looked at the woman speaking to him.

"No, Aunt Esther. I don't." He said it dully, sliding his milk glass back and forth on the table. "I don't hate it here."

Esther removed the last pan from the dishwasher and hung it above the oven.

"You hate it here," she said, "and you hate me."

"I don't!" Michael yelled. "It's not you!"

married or had children. She had never lived anywhere but Detroit. She liked her condominium.

But she was fiercely loyal to her family, and when her only sister had died, Esther insisted she be allowed to care for Michael. And Michael, afraid of going anywhere else, had accepted.

Oh, he was lonely. Even six months after their deaths, he still expected to see his parents—sitting on the couch as he walked into Esther's living room, waiting for the bathroom as he came out of the shower, coming in the door late at night. He still smelled his father's Old Spice somewhere, his mother's talc.

Sometimes he was so sure one of them was somewhere around him that he thought maybe he was going crazy. His heart hurt him. He wondered if he would ever get better.

And though he denied it, he did hate Esther. She was so different from his mother and father. Prejudiced—she admired only those who were white and Presbyterian. Selfish—she wouldn't allow him to use her phone. Complaining—she always had a headache or a backache or a stomachache.

The woman turned to face him in the kitchen. "Don't yell at me!" she yelled. "I'll not have it in my home. I can't make you happy, Michael. You just refuse to be happy here. And you punish me every day for it."

"Punish you?" Michael gawked at her. "I don't punish you! I don't care about you! I don't care what you eat or how you dress or where you go or what you think. Can't you just leave me alone?"

He slammed down the glass, scraped his chair back from the table and ran out the door.

"Michael!" yelled Esther.

They had been living together, the two of them, for six months. Michael's parents had died and only Esther could take him in—or, only she had offered to. Michael's other relatives could not imagine dealing with a fourteen-year-old boy. They wanted peaceful lives.

Esther lived in a condominium in a wealthy section of Detroit. Most of the area's residents were older (like her) and afraid of the world they lived in (like her). They stayed indoors much of the time. They trusted few people.

Esther liked living alone. She had never

He didn't want to, but he hated her. And he didn't know what to do except lie about it.

Michael hadn't made any friends at his new school, and his teachers barely noticed him. He came home alone every day and usually found Esther on the phone. She kept in close touch with several other women in nearby condominiums.

Esther told her friends she didn't understand Michael. She said she knew he must grieve for his parents, but why punish her? She said she thought she might send him away if he couldn't be nicer. She said she didn't deserve this.

But when Michael came in the door, she always quickly changed the subject.

One day after school Michael came home with a hermit crab. He had gone into a pet store, looking for some small living thing, and hermit crabs were selling for just a few dollars. He'd bought one, and a bowl.

Esther, for a change, was not on the phone when he arrived home. She was having tea and a crescent roll and seemed cheerful. Michael wanted badly to show someone what he had bought. So he showed her.

Esther surprised him. She picked up the shell

and poked the long, shiny nail of her little finger at the crab's claws.

"Where is he?" she asked.

Michael showed her the crab's eyes peering through the small opening of the shell.

"Well, for heaven's sake, come out of there!" she said to the crab, and she turned the shell upside down and shook it.

"Aunt Esther!" Michael grabbed for the shell.

"All right, all right." She turned it right side up. "Well," she said, "what does he do?"

Michael grinned and shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know," he answered. "Just grows, I guess."

His aunt looked at him.

"An attraction to a crab is something I can not identify with. However, it's fine with me if you keep him, as long as I can be assured he won't grow out of that bowl." She gave him a hard stare.

"He won't," Michael answered. "I promise."

The hermit crab moved into the condominium. Michael named him Sluggo and kept the bowl beside his bed. Michael had to watch the bowl for very long periods of time to catch Sluggo with his head poking out of his shell, moving around. Bedtime seemed to be Sluggo

go's liveliest part of the day, and Michael found it easy to lie and watch the busy crab as sleep slowly came on.

One day Michael arrived home to find Esther sitting on the edge of his bed, looking at the bowl. Esther usually did not intrude in Michael's room, and seeing her there disturbed him. But he stood at the doorway and said nothing.

Esther seemed perfectly comfortable, although she looked over at him with a frown on her face.

"I think he needs a companion," she said.

"What?" Michael's eyebrows went up as his jaw dropped down.

Esther sniffed.

"I think Sluggo needs a girl friend." She stood up. "Where is that pet store?"

Michael took her. In the store was a huge tank full of hermit crabs.

"Oh my!" Esther grabbed the rim of the tank and craned her neck over the side. "Look at them!"

Michael was looking more at his Aunt Esther than at the crabs. He couldn't believe it.

"Oh, look at those shells. You say they grow out of them? We must stock up with several

sizes. See the pink in that one? Michael, look! He's got his little head out!"

Esther was so dramatic—leaning into the tank, her bangle bracelets clanking, earrings swinging, red pumps clicking on the linoleum—that she attracted the attention of everyone in the store. Michael pretended not to know her well.

He and Esther returned to the condominium with a thirty-gallon tank and twenty hermit crabs.

Michael figured he'd have a heart attack before he got the heavy tank into their living room. He figured he'd die and Aunt Esther would inherit twenty-one crabs and funeral expenses.

But he made it. Esther carried the box of crabs.

"Won't Sluggo be surprised?" she asked happily. "Oh, I do hope we'll be able to tell him apart from the rest. He's their founding father!"

Michael, in a stupor over his Aunt Esther and the phenomenon of twenty-one hermit crabs, wiped out the tank, arranged it with gravel and sticks (as well as the plastic scuba diver Aunt Esther insisted on buying) and as-

sisted her in loading it up, one by one, with the new residents. The crabs were as overwhelmed as Michael. Not one showed its face.

Before moving Sluggo from his bowl, Aunt Esther marked his shell with some red fingernail polish so she could distinguish him from the rest. Then she flopped down on the couch beside Michael.

"Oh, what would your mother think, Michael, if she could see this mess we've gotten ourselves into!"

She looked at Michael with a broad smile, but it quickly disappeared. The boy's eyes were full of pain.

"Oh, my," she whispered. "I'm sorry."

Michael turned his head away.

Aunt Esther, who had not embraced anyone in years, gently put her arm about his shoulders.

"I am so sorry, Michael. Oh, you must hate me."

Michael sensed a familiar smell then. His mother's talc.

He looked at his aunt.

"No, Aunt Esther." He shook his head solemnly. "I don't hate you."

Esther's mouth trembled and her bangles

clanked as she patted his arm. She took a deep, strong breath.

"Well, let's look in on our friend Sluggo," she said.

They leaned their heads over the tank and found him. The crab, finished with the old home that no longer fit, was coming out of his shell.

KIM



I stood before our family altar. It was dawn. No one else in the apartment was awake. I stared at my father's photograph—his thin face stern, lips latched tight, his eyes peering permanently to the right. I was nine years old and still hoped that perhaps his eyes might move. Might notice me.

The candles and the incense

sticks, lit the day before to mark his death anniversary, had burned out. The rice and meat offered him were gone. After the evening feast, past midnight, I'd been wakened by my mother's crying. My oldest sister had joined in. My own tears had then come as well, but for a different reason.

I turned from the altar, tiptoed to the kitchen, and quietly drew a spoon from a drawer. I filled my lunch thermos with water and reached into our jar of dried lima beans. Then I walked outside to the street.

The sidewalk was completely empty. It was Sunday, early in April. An icy wind teetered trash cans and turned my cheeks to marble. In Vietnam we had no weather like that. Here in Cleveland people call it spring. I walked half a block, then crossed the street and reached the vacant lot.

I stood tall and scouted. No one was sleeping on the old couch in the middle. I'd never entered the lot before, or wanted to. I did so now, picking my way between tires and trash bags. I nearly stepped on two rats gnawing and froze. Then I told myself that I must show my bravery. I continued farther and chose a spot far from the sidewalk and hidden from view by a rusty refrigerator. I had to keep my project safe.

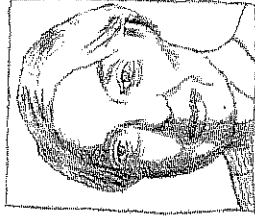
I took out my spoon and began to dig. The snow had melted, but the ground was hard. After much work, I finished one hole, then a second, then a third. I thought about how my mother and sisters remembered my father, how they knew his face from every angle and held in their fingers the feel of his hands. I had no such memories to cry over. I'd been born eight months after he'd died. Worse, he had no

memories of me. When his spirit hovered over our altar, did it even know who I was?

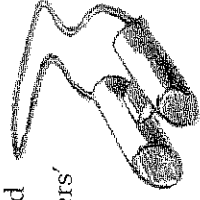
I dug six holes. All his life in Vietnam my father had been a farmer. Here our apartment house had no yard. But in that vacant lot he would see me. He would watch my beans break ground and spread, and would notice with pleasure their pods growing plump. He would see my patience and my hard work. I would show him that I could raise plants, as he had. I would show him that I was his daughter.

My class had sprouted lima beans in paper cups the year before. I now placed a bean in each of the holes. I covered them up, pressing the soil down firmly with my fingertips. I opened my thermos and watered them all. And I vowed to myself that those beans would thrive.

ANA



I do love to sit and look out the window. Why do I need TV when I have forty-eight apartment windows to watch across the vacant lot, and a sliver of Lake Erie? I've seen history out this window. So much. I was four when we moved here in 1919. The fruit-sellers' carts and coal wagons were pulled down the street by



horses back then. I used to stand just here and watch the coal brought up by the handsome lad from Groza, the village my parents were born in. Gibb Street was mainly Rumanians back then. It was "Adio"—"Good-bye"—in all the shops when you left. Then the Rumanians started leaving. They weren't the first, or the last. This has always been a working-class neighborhood. It's like a cheap hotel—you stay until you've got enough money to leave. A lot of Slovaks and Italians moved in next. Then Negro families in the Depression. Gibb Street became the line between the blacks and the whites, like a border between countries. I watched it happen, through this very window.

I lived over in Cleveland Heights for eighteen years, then I moved back in to take care of my parents. That border moved

too. Most all the whites left. Then the steel mills and factories closed and *everybody* left, like rats. Buildings abandoned. Men with no work drinking from nine to five instead, down there in the lot. Always the sirens, people killing each other. Now I see families from Mexico and Cambodia and countries I don't know, twelve people sometimes in one apartment. New languages in the shops and on the street. These new people leave when they can, like the others. I'm the only one staying. It's so. Staying and staring out this same window.

This spring I looked out and I saw something strange. Down in the lot, a little black-haired girl, hiding behind that refrigerator. She was working at the dirt and looking around suspiciously all the time. Then I realized. She was burying something.

I never had children of my own, but I've seen enough in that lot to know she was mixed up in something she shouldn't be. And after twenty years typing for the Parole department, I just about knew what she'd buried. Drugs most likely, or money, or a gun. The next moment, she disappeared like a rabbit.

I thought of calling up the police. Then I saw her there the next morning, and I decided I'd solve this case myself. We had a long spell of rain then. I didn't set eyes on her once. Then the weather turned warm and I saw her twice more, always in the morning, on her way to school. She was crouched down with her back to me so I couldn't see just what she was doing. My curiosity was like a fever inside me. Then one morning she was there, glancing about, and she looked straight up at this window.

I pulled my head back behind the curtain. I wasn't sure if she'd seen me. If she had, she wouldn't leave her treasure buried long. Then I knew I'd have to dig it up before she did.

I waited an hour after she left. Then I took an old butter knife and my cane and hobbled down all three flights of stairs. I worked my way through that awful jungle of junk and finally came to her spot. I stooped down. It was wet there and easy digging. I hacked and dug, but didn't find anything, except for a large white bean. I tried a new spot and found another, then a third. Then the truth of it slapped me full in the face. I said to myself, "What have you *done*?" Two beans had roots. I knew I'd done them harm. I felt like I'd read through her secret diary and had ripped out a page without meaning to. I laid those

beans right back in the ground, as gently as sleeping babies. Then I patted the soil as smooth as could be.

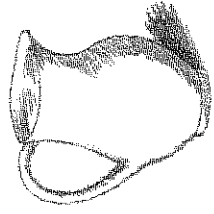
The next morning she was back. I peeked around the curtain. She didn't look up here or give any sign that she noticed something wrong. I could see her clearly this time. She reached a hand into her schoolbag. Then she pulled out a jar, unscrewed the lid, and poured out water onto the ground.

That afternoon I bought some binoculars.

WENDELL



My phone doesn't ring much, which suits me fine. That's how I got the news about our boy, shot dead like a dog in the street. And the word, last year, about my wife's car wreck. I can't hear a phone and not jerk inside. When Ana called I was still asleep. Phone calls that wake me up are the worst.



"Get up here quick!" she says. I live on the ground floor and watch out for her a little. We're the only white people left in the building. I ran up the stairs. I could tell it was serious. I prayed I wouldn't find her dead. When I got there, she looked perfectly fine. She dragged me over to the window. "Look down there!" she says. "They're dying!"

"What?" I yelled back.

"The plants!" she says.

I was mad. She gave me some binoculars and told me all about the Chinese girl. I found the plants and got them in focus. There were four of them in a row, still little. They were wilted. Leaves flopped flat on the ground.

"What are they?" she asked.

"Some kind of beans." I grew up on a little farm in Kentucky. "But she planted

'em way too early. She's lucky those seeds even came up."

"But they did," said Ana. "And it's up to us to save them."

It was a weekend in May and hot. You'd have thought that those beans were hers. They needed water, especially in that heat. She said the girl hadn't come in four days—sick, probably, or gone out of town. Ana had twisted her ankle and couldn't manage the stairs. She pointed to a pitcher. "Fill that up and soak them good. Quick now."

School janitors take too much bossing all week to listen to an extra helping on weekends. I stared at her one long moment, then took my time about filling the pitcher.

I walked down the stairs and into the lot and found the girl's plants. You don't plant beans till the weather's hot. Then I

saw what had kept her seeds from freezing. The refrigerator in front of them had bounced the sunlight back on the soil, heating it up like an oven. I bent down and gave the dirt a feel. It was hard packed and light colored. I studied the plants. Leaves shaped like spades in a deck of cards. Definitely beans. I scraped up a ring of dirt around the first plant, to hold the water and any rain that fell. I picked up the pitcher and poured the water slowly. Then I heard something move and spun around. The girl was there, stone-still, ten feet away, holding her own water jar.

She hadn't seen me behind the refrigerator. She looked afraid for her life. Maybe she thought I'd jump up and grab her. I gave her a smile and showed her that I was just giving her plants some water. This made her eyes go even bigger. I stood up

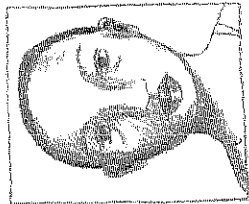
slowly and backed away. I smiled again. She watched me leave. We never spoke one word.

I walked back there that evening and checked on the beans. They'd picked themselves up and were looking fine. I saw that she'd made a circle of dirt around the other three plants. Out of nowhere the words from the Bible came into my head: "And a little child shall lead them." I didn't know why at first. Then I did. There's plenty about my life I can't change. Can't bring the dead back to life on this earth. Can't make the world loving and kind. Can't change myself into a millionaire. But a patch of ground in this trashy lot—I *can* change that. Can change it big. Better to put my time into that than moaning about the other all day. That little grammar-school girl showed me that.

The lot had buildings on three sides. I walked around and picked myself out a spot that wouldn't be shaded too much. I dragged the garbage off to the side and tossed out the biggest pieces of broken glass. I looked over my plot, squatted down, and fingered the soil awhile.

That Monday I brought a shovel home from work.

VIRGIL



My father, he always has a smile on his face and a plan moving in his head. We were standing together on the sidewalk while the men were clearing the lot. I was watching the rats running for their lives. They were shooting off every which



way. A couple of dealers came over, the ones always bragging about how bad

they are. A rat ran right up one of their legs. The dude screamed, just like women do with a mouse in cartoons, only louder. Shook his leg like his toe was being electrocuted. That rat flew off and dove down a storm drain. I looked at my father. That's when I saw that he hadn't paid the rat any mind. Hadn't even turned his head. His eyes were stuck completely on the garden land being uncovered. He had a two-foot-wide smile on his face.

My father drove a bus back in Haiti. Here he drives a taxi. That night he drove himself way across town to borrow two shovels from a friend of his. The next morning was the first day without school. I was done with fifth grade forever. I'd planned on sleeping till noon to celebrate. But when it was still half dark my father shook my shoulder. School was over, but

that garden was just starting.

We walked down and picked out a place to dig up. The ground was packed so hard, the tip of my shovel bounced off it like a pogo stick. We tried three spots till we found one we liked. Then we walked back and forth, picking out broken glass, like chickens pecking seeds. After that we turned the soil. We were always digging up more trash—bolts and screws and pieces of brick. That's how I found the locket. It was shaped like a heart and covered with rust, with a broken chain. I got it open. Inside was this tiny photo of a girl. She was white, with a sad-looking face. She had on this hat with flowers on it. I don't know why I kept it instead of tossing it on our trash pile.

It seemed like hours and hours before we had the ground finished. We rested a while. Then my father asked if I was ready.

I thought he meant ready to plant our seeds. But instead, we turned another square of ground. Then another after that. Then three more after that. My father hadn't been smiling to himself about some little garden. He was thinking of a farm, to make money. I'd seen a package of seeds for pole beans and hoped that's what we'd grow. They get so tall that the man in the picture was picking 'em way at the top of a ladder. But my father said no. He was always asking people in his cab about how to get rich. One of 'em told him that fancy restaurants paid lots of money for this baby lettuce, smaller than the regular kind, to use in rich folks' salads. The fresher it was, the higher the price. My father planned to pick it and then race it right over in his cab. Running red lights if he had to.

Lettuce seeds are smaller than sand. I

felt embarrassed, planting so much ground. No one else's garden was a quarter the size of ours. Suddenly I saw Miss Fleck. I hardly recognized her in jeans. She was the strictest teacher in Ohio. I'd had her for third grade. She pronounced every letter in every word, and expected you to talk the same way. She was tall and even blacker than my father. No slouching in your seat in her class or any kind of rudeness. The other teachers seemed afraid of her too. She walked over just when we finished planting.

"Well, Virgil," she said. "You seem to have claimed quite a large *plantation* here."

That's just what I was afraid of hearing. I looked away from her, down at our sticks. We'd put 'em in the ground and run string around 'em, cutting our land up into six pieces. I didn't know why, till my father stepped forward.

"Actually, madam, only this very first area here is ours," he said. He had on his biggest smile. He must have remembered her. "The others we have planted at the request of relatives who have no tools or who live too far."

"Really, now," said Miss Fleck.

"Yes, madam," said my father. He pointed at the closest squares of land. "My brother Antoine. My auntie, Anne-Marie."

My eyes opened wide. They both lived in Haiti. I stared at my father, but he just kept smiling. His finger pointed farther to the left. "My Uncle Philippe." He lived in New York. "My wife's father." He died last year. "And her sister." My mother didn't have any sisters. I looked at my father's smiling face. I'd never watched an adult lie before.

"And what did your *extended* family of

gardeners ask you to plant?" said Miss Fleck.

"Lettuce," said my father. "All lettuce."

"What a coincidence," she said back. She just stood, then walked over to her own garden. I'm pretty sure she didn't believe him. But what principal could she send him to?

That lettuce was like having a new baby in the family. And I was like its mother. I watered it in the morning if my father was still out driving. It was supposed to come up in seven days, but it didn't. My father couldn't figure out why. Neither of us knew anything about plants. This wrinkled old man in a straw hat tried to show me something when I poured out the water. He spoke some language, but it sure wasn't English. I didn't get what he was babbling about, till the lettuce finally came up in wavy lines and bunches instead of straight

rows. I'd washed the seeds out of their places.

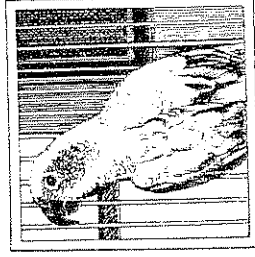
The minute it came up, it started to wilt. It was like a baby always crying for its milk. I got sick of hauling bottles of water in our shopping cart, like I was some old lady. Then the heat came. The leaves shriveled up. Some turned yellow. That lettuce was dying.

My father practically cried, looking at it. He'd stop by in his cab when he could, with two five-gallon water containers riding in the back instead of passengers. Then bugs started eating big holes in the plants. I couldn't see anyone buying them from us. My father had promised we'd make enough money to buy me an eighteen-speed bike. I was counting on it. I'd already told my friends. My father asked all his passengers what to do. His cab was like a library for him. Finally, one of 'em told him

that spring or fall was the time to grow lettuce, that the summer was too hot for it. My father wasn't smiling when he told us.

I couldn't believe it. I stomped outside. I could feel that eighteen-speed slipping away. I was used to seeing kids lying and making mistakes, but not grown-ups. I was mad at my father. Then I sort of felt sorry for him.

That night I pulled out the locket. I opened it up and looked at the picture. We'd studied Greek myths in school that year. In our book, the goddess of crops and the earth had a sad mouth and flowers around her, just like the girl in the locket. I scraped off the rust with our dish scrubber and shined up that locket as bright as I could get it. Then I opened it up, just a crack. Then I whispered, "Save our lettuce," to the girl.



Papa's Parrot

Though his father was fat and merely owned a candy and nut shop, Harry Tillian liked his papa. Harry stopped liking candy and nuts when he was around seven, but, in spite of this, he and Mr. Tillian had remained friends and were still friends the year Harry turned twelve.

For years, after school, Harry had always stopped in to see his father at work. Many of Harry's friends stopped there, too, to spend a few cents choosing penny candy from the giant

bins or to sample Mr. Tillian's latest batch of roasted peanuts. Mr. Tillian looked forward to seeing his son and his son's friends every day. He liked the company.

When Harry entered junior high school, though, he didn't come by the candy and nut shop as often. Nor did his friends. They were older and they had more spending money. They went to a burger place. They played video games. They shopped for records. None of them were much interested in candy and nuts anymore.

A new group of children came to Mr. Tillian's shop now. But not Harry Tillian and his friends.

The year Harry turned twelve was also the year Mr. Tillian got a parrot. He went to a pet store one day and bought one for more money than he could really afford. He brought the parrot to his shop, set its cage near the sign for maple clusters and named it Rocky.

Harry thought this was the strangest thing his father had ever done, and he told him so, but Mr. Tillian just ignored him.

Rocky was good company for Mr. Tillian. When business was slow, Mr. Tillian would

turn on a small color television he had sitting in a corner, and he and Rocky would watch the soap operas. Rocky liked to scream when the romantic music came on, and Mr. Tillian would yell at him to shut up, but they seemed to enjoy themselves.

The more Mr. Tillian grew to like his parrot, and the more he talked to it instead of to people, the more embarrassed Harry became. Harry would stroll past the shop, on his way somewhere else, and he'd take a quick look inside to see what his dad was doing. Mr. Tillian was always talking to the bird. So Harry kept walking.

At home things were different. Harry and his father joked with each other at the dinner table as they always had—Mr. Tillian teasing Harry about his smelly socks; Harry teasing Mr. Tillian about his blubbery stomach. At home things seemed all right.

But one day, Mr. Tillian became ill. He had been at work, unpacking boxes of caramels, when he had grabbed his chest and fallen over on top of the candy. A customer had found him, and he was taken to the hospital in an ambulance.

Mr. Tillian couldn't leave the hospital. He lay in bed, tubes in his arms, and he worried about his shop. New shipments of candy and nuts would be arriving. Rocky would be hungry. Who would take care of things?

Harry said he would. Harry told his father that he would go to the store every day after school and unpack boxes. He would sort out all the candy and nuts. He would even feed Rocky.

So, the next morning, while Mr. Tillian lay in his hospital bed, Harry took the shop key to school with him. After school he left his friends and walked to the empty shop alone. In all the days of his life, Harry had never seen the shop closed after school. Harry didn't even remember what the CLOSED sign looked like. The key stuck in the lock three times, and inside he had to search all the walls for the light switch.

The shop was as his father had left it. Even the caramels were still spilled on the floor. Harry bent down and picked them up one by one, dropping them back in the boxes. The bird in its cage watched him silently.

Harry opened the new boxes his father

hadn't gotten to. Peppermints. Jawbreakers. Ice creams. Strawberry kisses. Harry traveled from bin to bin, putting the candies where they belonged.

"Hello!"

Harry jumped, spilling a box of jawbreakers.

"Hello, Rocky!"

Harry stared at the parrot. He had forgotten it was there. The bird had been so quiet, and Harry had been thinking only of the candy.

"Hello," Harry said.

"Hello, Rocky!" answered the parrot.

Harry walked slowly over to the cage. The parrot's food cup was empty. Its water was dirty. The bottom of the cage was a mess.

Harry carried the cage into the back room.

"Hello, Rocky!"

"Is that all you can say, you dumb bird?" Harry mumbled. The bird said nothing else.

Harry cleaned the bottom of the cage, refilled the food and water cups, then put the cage back in its place and resumed sorting the candy.

"Where's Harry?"

Harry looked up.

"Where's Harry?"

Harry stared at the parrot.

"Where's Harry?"

Chills ran down Harry's back. What could the bird mean? It was like something from "The Twilight Zone."

"Where's Harry?"

Harry swallowed and said, "I'm here. I'm here, you stupid bird."

"You stupid bird!" said the parrot.

Well, at least he's got one thing straight, thought Harry.

"Miss him! Miss him! Where's Harry? You stupid bird!"

Harry stood with a handful of peppermints.

"What?" he asked.

"Where's Harry?" said the parrot.

"I'm here, you stupid bird! I'm here!" Harry yelled. He threw the peppermints at the cage, and the bird screamed and clung to its perch.

Harry sobbed, "I'm here." The tears were coming.

Harry leaned over the glass counter.

"Papa." Harry buried his face in his arms.

"Where's Harry?" repeated the bird.

Harry sighed and wiped his face on his sleeve. He watched the parrot. He understood now:

someone had been saying, for a long time, "Where's Harry? Miss him."

Harry finished his unpacking, then swept the floor of the shop. He checked the furnace so the bird wouldn't get cold. Then he left to go visit his papa.

"Have you seen a cat?" The word cat came out hard as a rock.

The young man straightened up.

"No, ma'am. No cats around here. Somebody dropped a mutt off a couple nights ago, but a Mack truck got it yesterday about noon. Dog didn't have a chance."

The woman's eyes pinched his.

"I lost my cat. Orange and white. If you see him, you be more careful of him than that dog. This is a bad road for cats."

She marched toward the door.

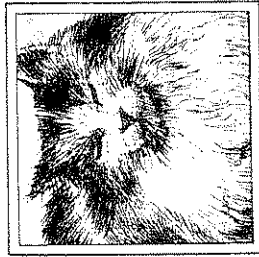
"I'll be back," she said, like a threat, and the young man straightened up again as she went out.

"Louie! Louie! Where are you?"

She was a very tall woman, and skinny. Her black hair was long and shiny, like an Indian's. She might have been a Cherokee making her way alongside a river, alert and watchful. Tracking.

But Route 6 was no river. It was a truckers' road, lined with gas stations, motels, dairy bars, diners. A nasty road, smelling of diesel and rubber.

The woman's name was Magda. And she



A Bad Road for Cats

"Louie! Louie! Where are you?"

The woman called it out again and again as she walked along Route 6. A bad road for cats. She prayed he hadn't wandered this far. But it had been nearly two weeks, and still Louis hadn't come home.

She stopped at a Shell station, striding up to the young man at the register. Her eyes snapped black and fiery as she spit the question at him:

was of French blood, not Indian. Magda was not old, but she carried herself as a very old and strong person might, with no fear of death and with a clear sense of her right to the earth and a disdain for the ugliness of belching machines and concrete.

Magda lived in a small house about two miles off Route 6. There she worked at a loom, weaving wool gathered from the sheep she owned. Magda's husband was dead, and she had no children. Only a cat named Louis.

Dunh. Dunh. Duuunnh.

Magda's heart pounded as a tank truck roared by. *Duuunnh.* The horn hurt her ears, making her feel sick inside, stealing some of her strength.

Four years before, Magda had found Louis at one of the gas stations on Route 6. She had been on her way home from her weekly trip to the grocery and had pulled in for a fill-up. As she'd stood inside the station in front of the cigarette machine, drooping in quarters, she'd felt warm fur against her leg and had given a start. Looking down, she'd seen an orange-and-white kitten. It had purred and meowed and pushed its nose into Magda's

shoes. Smiling, Magda had picked the kitten up. Then she had seen the horror.

Half of the kitten's tail was gone. What remained was bloody and scabbed, and the stump stuck straight out.

Magda had carried the animal to one of the station attendants.

"Whose kitten is this?" Her eyes drilled in the question.

The attendant had shrugged his shoulders.

"Nobody's. Just a drop-off."

Magda had moved closer to him.

"What happened to its tail?" she asked, the words slow and clear.

"Got caught in the door. Stupid cat was under everybody's feet—no wonder half its tail got whacked."

Magda could not believe such a thing.

"And you offer it no help?" she had asked.

"Not my cat," he answered.

Magda's face had blazed as she'd turned and stalked out the door with the kitten.

A veterinarian mended what was left of the kitten's tail. And Magda named it Louis for her grandfather.

"Louie! Louis! Where are you?"

Dunh. Duuunnh. Another horn at her back. Magda wondered about her decision to walk Route 6 rather than drive it. She had thought that on foot she might find Louis more easily—in a ditch, under some bushes, up a tree. They were even, she and Louis, if she were on foot, too. But the trucks were making her misery worse.

Magda saw a dairy bar up ahead. She thought she would stop and rest. She would have some coffee and a slice of quiet away from the road.

She walked across the wide gravel lot to the tiny walk-up window. Pictures of strawberry sundaes, spongy shakes, cones with curly peaks were plastered all over the building, drawing business from the road with big red words like *CHILLY*.

Magda barely glanced at the young girl working inside. All teenage girls looked alike to her.

"Coffee," she ordered.

"Black?"

"Yes."

Magda moved to one side and leaned against the building. The trucks were rolling out on the highway, but far enough away to give her

time to regain her strength. No horns, no smoke, no dirt. A little peace.

She drank her coffee and thought about Louis when he was a kitten. Once, he had leaped from her attic window and she had found him, stunned and shivering, on the hard gravel below. The veterinarian said Louis had broken a leg and was lucky to be alive. The kitten had stomped around in a cast for a few weeks. Magda drew funny faces on it to cheer him up.

Louis loved white cheese, tall grass and the skeins of wool Magda left lying around her loom.

That's what she would miss most, she thought, if Louis never came back: an orange and white cat making the yarn fly under her loom.

Magda finished her coffee, then turned to throw the empty cup in the trash can. As she did, a little sign in the bottom corner of the window caught her eye. The words were surrounded by dirty smudges:

4 SAL. CAT

Magda caught her breath. She moved up to the window and this time looked squarely into the face of the girl.

"Are you selling a *cat*?" she said quietly, but hard on *cat*.

"Not me. This boy," the girl answered, brushing her stringy hair back from her face.

"Where is he?" Magda asked.

"That yellow house right off the road up there."

Magda headed across the lot.

She had to knock only once. The door opened and standing there was a boy about fifteen.

"I saw your sign," Magda said. "I am interested in your *cat*."

The boy did not answer. He looked at Magda's face with his wide blue eyes, and he grinned, showing a mouth of rotten and missing teeth.

Magda felt a chill move over her.

"The *cat*," she repeated. "You have one to sell? Is it orange and white?"

The boy stopped grinning. Without a word, he slammed the door in Magda's face.

She was stunned. A strong woman like her, to be so stunned by a boy. It shamed her. But again she knocked on the door—and very hard this time.

No answer.

What kind of boy is this? Magda asked herself. A strange one. And she feared he had Louis.

She had just raised her hand to knock a third time when the door opened. There the boy stood with Louis in his arms.

Again, Magda was stunned. Her *cat* was covered with oil and dirt. He was thin, and his head hung weakly. When he saw Magda, he seemed to use his last bit of strength to let go a pleading cry.

The boy no longer was grinning. He held Louis close against him, forcefully stroking the *cat*'s ears again and again and again. The boy's eyes were full of tears, his mouth twisted into sad protest.

Magda wanted to leap for Louis, steal him and run for home. But she knew better. This was an unusual boy. She must be careful.

Magda put her hand into her pocket and pulled out a dollar bill.

"Enough?" she asked, holding it up.

The boy clutched the *cat* harder, his mouth puckering fiercely.

Magda pulled out two more dollar bills. She held the money up, the question in her eyes.

The boy relaxed his hold on Louis. He tilted his head to one side, as if considering Magda's offer.

Then, in desperation, Magda pulled out a twenty-dollar bill.

"Enough?" she almost screamed.

The boy's head jerked upright, then he grabbed all the bills with one hand and shoved Louis at Magda with the other.

Magda cradled Louis in her arms, rubbing her cheek across his head. Before walking away, she looked once more at the boy. He stood stiffly with the money clenched in his hand, tears running from his eyes and dripping off his face like rainwater.

Magda took Louis home. She washed him and healed him. And for many days she was in a rage at the strange boy who had sold her her own cat, nearly dead.

When Louis was healthy, though, and his old fat self, playing games among the yarn beneath her loom, her rage grew smaller and smaller until finally she could forgive the strange boy.

She came to feel sympathy for him, remembering his tears. And she wove some orange and white wool into a pattern, stuffed it with

cotton, sewed two green button eyes and a small pink mouth onto it, then attached a matching stub of a tail.

She put the gift in a paper bag, and, on her way to the grocery one day, she dropped the bag in front of the boy's yellow house.