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FICTION

The only thing Benjamin Koppelman wants right now is for all those people out there in the world to leave him alone, which is why he's sitting in his safe place beneath the piano in his family room, inside the tent he's made out of his pale blue blanket by wrapping it all the way around him and then pulling it up over his head, while he listens to his mother's faraway-sounding voice in the kitchen down the hall, where she's talking on the phone to his father. You're not supposed to call his father in his office, where he's busy being a doctor, unless it's an emergency – that's the rule – which means it's an emergency they're having right now, and that's what she's telling him, Ben's pretty sure, even though her voice just sounds like mmmm-mmmm-MMMM-mmmmm-MMMM-mmmmm-MMMM-mmmmm from inside the blanket.

Well anyway, he doesn't need to hear what she's saying because he already knows that. *Of course* it's an emergency they're having if he's not where he's supposed to be at this time on a Wednesday morning, which is sitting at his desk at the very back of the row of desks that's farthest from the window in Mrs. Santaya's fourth grade class in Room 303 (first door on the right on the third floor landing, 24 stairs straight up from the office) at Lincoln School, with Maggie O'Neil on his left side and Jeremy Etlestein in front of him, but no one on his right side or behind him so that he's always sure to have as much personal space as he needs. He was the very first one to know they were having an emergency, way before his mother did even, when they reached the bottom of the hill on Kimball Lane on the way to school this morning. *She* didn't even realize, until *he* told it to her, that number nine was missing from the list.

"Now Benjamin, stay calm. Don't jump to conclusions." That's what she said when he yelled out, "OH, NO!" and started running up the hill. He didn't even take the time to point out to her that a conclusion isn't a *place*, that it isn't something you can *jump* to, because he was too busy running and still maybe hoping a little bit that he was wrong, even though he knew that he wasn't, even though he knew it already for sure, that something terrible had happened to number nine now that it was missing from the list, and see? he'd been right, because guess who he'd found waiting for him there, at the top of the hill, where Mrs. Delgado and Admiral

and Cha-cha and Miss Trixie and Popeye and Slugger were supposed to have been? No one, that's who.

"I need you to get your control" is what his mother said when she caught up with him, because by then she could see it, too, that number nine was missing, so there went number ten, too, which meant that *everything* was ruined, because if you don't go through numbers nine and ten on the list, how can you ever get to number *twelve*? You *can't*, of course. That's the rule. That's the *rule* that you can't get to number twelve if you don't go through numbers nine and ten, because that's the order of the numbers – nine, ten, eleven, twelve – which meant that it wasn't even 8:30 in the morning and already the whole entire *day* had been broken all apart. "Okaaaaaay?" she said in her slow, quiet voice that she uses when she knows things are bad. "I need you to get your control, and I need you to remember how important it is to be flexible."

Flexible is how this whole thing had started. *Flexible* is what she'd said to him all the way back at the end of last summer, when she'd taken out their School Day Morning Routine list poster from the closet where she'd put it at the end of third grade, and lay it out on the kitchen table and said, "There's something I want to talk to you about." Which is never a good thing, he knows, so he'd already had that warning light feeling inside him even before she'd told him that, even though she knew he was used to having her drive him to school, this year they'd be doing something new. This year, for fourth grade, she'd be walking him there instead.

See?" she'd said. "We'll do everything on the list just the way we always have, up to number eight:

1. Get out of bed.
2. Get dressed.
3. Eat breakfast.
4. Brush teeth.
5. Put on coat.
6. Pick up backpack.
7. Walk out door.

Then, here, for number eight, we'll just pull off the card that says 'Get into car' and put in one that says, 'Walk down street' instead."

He hates Instead, he'd reminded her, and she'd said she knew that, but that now that he was going to be a fourth grader, it was time for him to learn to be more *flexible*. "That's a big part of getting older, kiddo," she'd said. "Learning how to be more flexible." And it was also time for him to learn how to walk with someone else the way people do when they're going along the street side by side. *In fact*, she'd said, it would be a good idea if they got some practice doing that before school even started. Which is why that's what they'd done every single day in August – walked from their house, up the hill on Kimball Lane and down Green Bay Road to Lincoln School.

And it was a good thing they did practice, too, because *not like that*, she'd said on some days, because he was walking too far ahead of her, and then *not like that*, she'd said on others, because he was walking too far behind her, and then *not like that*, she'd said after that, because he was keeping his eyes on *her* feet and trying to make *his* feet – the right, then the left, then the right, then the left – move at exactly the same time they did. And in between all that, she was saying, "The rule is that we don't have to stop at the end of a driveway, *unless* there's a car pulling out of it," and "The rule is that we always walk on the sidewalk, *unless* someone rides up behind us on a bicycle, in which case we can step onto the grass," and "The rule is that we walk with our hands at our sides, *unless* we're passing a lawnmower, and *then* we can cover our ears."

He hates Unless, he'd reminded her. *Real* rules don't *have* Unless, he'd reminded her, and she'd said that she knew that, but that putting up with Unless was part of being a flexible fourth grader, and then she'd sighed, and he'd sighed right after her, because what he was thinking right then was that, altogether, fourth grade was beginning to seem like a not very good idea. But then, finally, one day, after a lot of days of practice, she'd said, "Wow, BENnie! Look at YOU! You're doing much BETter," and he'd known from the way her voice went up like that that she was happy about it because that's what Mrs. Montgomery, who he goes to spend time with first thing after lunch every day, and who he went to spend time with last year, in third grade, too, and who he spent time with even in the summer, when there wasn't any school, had been working on

with him ever since June – how to tell how someone is feeling from if their voice goes up or down.

Only then there was more. *Then* his mother had said he had to start working on looking into her face every once in a while at the same time that they were walking because they weren't really just walking *side by side*. They were walking *together*. He hates Together, he'd reminded her, and she'd said she knew that, which is why he had to *work* on it, and which was a big reason why they would be walking to school this year, so that it would begin to be easier for him, which was what she was sure would happen.

Boy, was she wrong, is what she found out right away on the first day of school, because boy, did she forget to tell him something, which was that their neighborhood on a school day morning is exactly *not* like their neighborhood on a summer afternoon, when everyone's at camp or at the beach or at their country club. What their neighborhood on a school day morning *is* exactly like is the machine his big sisters, Lauren and Madeline, use to make popcorn in when their friends come over to watch movies on t.v. – **KAPOW! KAPOW! KAPOW!** – with things moving in all different directions and making loud startling noises and exploding all over the place.

He'd never noticed that about his neighborhood on school day mornings when he was inside his mother's car, being driven through it, but he sure did notice it – *all* of him sure did notice it – *that* morning. His skin noticed it and his heart noticed it and the back of his neck noticed it and under his arms noticed it and his stomach noticed it and that thing inside him that tells him to flap his hands really fast up and down, that his father says he has to try very hard not to listen to, especially when he's outside the house, noticed it most of all, the whole time they were heading up the hill on Kimball.

KAPOW! KAPOW! KAPOW! KAPOW! KAPOW!

Kidskidskidskidskidskids, without very many grownups around anywhere to say, "Okay! Simmer down now!" and "That'll be just about enough of that," and "What did we learn about jumping on people's heads?" the way they do on the playground at recess. Just kidskidskidskidskidskids biking scootering running hopping jumping leaping skipping racing – backwards forwards up down on the grass on the street over the curb and back again

whole time he was walking, and it *did* make him feel safer, but it also made him feel so tired and spacey and mixed up by the time he got to school that the whole time he was in math, which they have the very first thing and which is usually his easiest class, Mrs. Santaya kept saying, "Ben, I don't think you're with us this morning," which made him even *more* mixed up because he was right *there*, sitting in his chair at his desk at the very back of the row of desks that's farthest from the window in Mrs. Santaya's fourth grade class in Room 303 (first door on the right on the third floor landing, 24 stairs straight up from the office) at Lincoln School, with Maggie O'Neil on his left side and Jeremy Ettlestein in front of him, but no one on his right side or behind him so that he's always sure to have as much personal space as he needs, so where else could he *be*? But at least he made it all the way to school. At least he never ended up back at home again.

Until today, that is, of course. Well, of course he's back at home *today*, because they're having an *emergency*. And of course he's under the *piano*, because the piano's his friend, so he can count on it to be there for him when he's having a bad time, which is something Mrs. Montgomery says is one thing friends do. She does that a lot – tells him what kinds of things friends do, because making new friends is something else she says he has to work on this year, kind of like it's his homework.

When she first told him that, he right away thought about how all the kids he sees on his way to school in the morning move all together in bunches, and about how they're always putting their arms around each other and slapping each other's backs and high fiving each other and looking into each other's faces and he already knew that that was homework he was going to be getting a very bad grade on. Which is something he tried to tell her, only he doesn't think she really heard him, and what he also tried to tell her, only he doesn't think she really heard him, is that anyway he doesn't *need* any new friends when he already has the piano, which isn't only there for him when he's underneath it.

No, it's also there for him when he's sitting on its bench and lifting up its lid to play it, which is his favorite thing in the whole world to do, even more than reading about lizards. That's the only kind of togetherness he likes, the kind he does with the piano. It's exactly *not* like the kind of togetherness

where he has to look into faces, which is what he and Mrs. Montgomery are working on now. "Just read the *clues*," she says, "and you'll know what eyes are *saying* to you. Wide open means surprised or scared, for instance, and narrow means angry or confused." "And what about looking into the sun?" he'd asked her once. "Can't narrow mean that a person is looking into the sun?" But she'd said let's just stick with emotions for now, and she'd moved on to eyebrows.

"Raised means startled or surprised," she'd said, "and scrunched down means angry or perplexed. Read the *clues*, Ben! They're right there to *help* you. Like with mouths, for example, mouths are easiest of all. Turned down means sad or deep in thought. Turned up means happy or friendly or proud." Which didn't sound easiest of all to him. "What about a person who's saying 'cheese' because he's posing for a picture? Can't that be what turned up means, too?" he'd asked her, and she'd sighed and shook her head and said let's not complicate the issue, why don't we just talk about skin? "Pale means frightened or sick," she'd said. "Red means angry or embarrassed." "What about sunburn?" he'd wanted to ask, but instead he'd just looked at the picture of the face she was holding up to him, waiting for him to tell her what it was feeling, closed his own eyes and picked an emotion, the first emotion he could think of, from in between the *ors*. "Confused?" he'd asked. "Try again," she'd said.

He *never* has to try again when he sits down at the piano. There aren't any *ors* when he sits down at the piano. He always knows exactly what he'll find waiting when he lifts up its lid: 88 keys. 52 white. 36 black. *Every time. Always 88. Always 52. Always 36. Always black and white.* Never any colors running all together and making him dizzy and mixed up. Never any eyes and eyebrows and mouths and skin widening and narrowing and rising and scrunching and turning up and down and pale and red. Just 88. 52. 36. Just seven octaves plus a minor third, from A0 to C8. *Every time.*

And that isn't even the best of all part. The best of all *part* is that the piano understands what he's trying to say, and makes it so that everyone else can understand it, too. When he's together with the piano, people don't just *understand* what he's saying, they even want him

to say *more*, which is something he knows because, when he's done, they clap very loud and then they yell out things like, "BRAVO!" and "ENCORE!" which he wishes they wouldn't do because it hurts his ears and prickles his skin and makes him want to go *under* the piano, which is what he did at his first recital, but his father told him afterwards that that isn't the best way to handle it, so now he counts inside his head to try to make himself not hear the clapping and yelling so much, and that helps.

Sometimes people even cry after he finishes playing. And one time he heard a woman say to his mother, "What a *gift* your son has!" which didn't make any sense at all because he'd looked all around the room and there hadn't been anything wrapped up in fancy paper with a bow on it anywhere, but his mother had said "thank you," so he'd decided that maybe that woman had just gotten confused and his mother was remembering to use her manners by not telling her how mixed up she was, so he'd used his manners too, and didn't ask where his gift was, and as soon as he got home he'd added a sticker to his Good Behavior Chart.

But one thing for sure that people never do after his fingers stop moving and he pushes back the bench and stands up is say, "Huh?" "Huh?" is what those two boys had said on that day, a couple of months after he and his mother had started walking to school, when he'd tried to be a good friend to them. It was when they had just reached the top of the hill, when his mother had stopped to talk to a woman she knew, who had come out of her house to pick up her newspaper in her driveway, and he'd walked a little bit away to wait so that the woman wouldn't reach out and touch him or look into his face or say things to him and expect him to say things back to her. That's when he'd seen two boys in his class come racing each other up the hill and then come to a stop and bend over with their hands on their knees to catch their breath. Even though he was busy piano pedaling away all the sharp edges and bright colors and loud noises around him, he couldn't help but notice that this was a chance to try to do his Making New Friends homework.

The reason he knew it was a chance to try to do his Making New Friends homework is because he saw right away that there was a way that he could help those two boys, and that's another big thing that friends do for

each other, is what Mrs. Montgomery had said. First, he'd had to remind himself how she'd said he should get started, which was to look into their faces (even though that made his stomach feel like it was an elevator that was dropping from floor 100 to floor 1 without stopping at any of the other floors), so he'd walked up to them, but not too close, so that he wouldn't be in their personal space, and did the best he could, which was to look at an ear, first on one of them and then on the other, and then he'd said, "You can't do that here."

That's when both of them had said, "Huh?" at exactly the same time, so he'd pointed to the sign they were standing right next to: SLOW CHILDREN, it said. "This street is only for slow children. See? It's the rule. It's even on a sign, which means it's *really* the rule, so you can't run like that here. I know a lot of the kids around here break that rule but that doesn't make it right. Just because other people break a rule doesn't mean *you* won't get in trouble if *you* break it, and that's why I'm telling you, so you won't do it again and get in trouble. I'm *helping* you because that's what friends do."

Which is when they had looked at each other and started smiling, which made their mouths turn up and which meant that they were feeling happy or friendly or proud, and even though he wasn't sure which one it was, he knew it meant that he must have done a good job of being a friend and he couldn't wait to tell Mrs. Montgomery that. But then one of them had said, "Weirdo," and the other had said, "Freak," and they'd turned and walked on toward Green Bay Road.

That for sure didn't work the way Mrs. Montgomery had said it was supposed to, is what he was thinking then, and he was also thinking, see? he *knew* all along he was going to get a bad grade on this homework, and he was about to go back to his mother and ask her why, if he did everything he was supposed to, he hadn't ended up making new friends, but the funny thing that happened is that that was when he *did* end up making new friends.

Five new friends, even, and six if you count Mrs. Delgado, so maybe it just works differently than Mrs. Montgomery explained it, or maybe she forgot to tell him that part, but anyway that was when Mrs. Delgado, who

he didn't know was Mrs. Delgado then, but who had heard what those boys had said to him because she was standing close by, holding Admiral and Cha-cha and Miss Trixie and Popeye and Slugger (who he also didn't know were Admiral and Cha-cha and Miss Trixie and Popeye and Slugger yet) on their leashes where they'd stopped to smell the grass, came up to him and asked him if he'd like to meet *her* friends, which right away it seemed like he was already doing because Cha-cha was licking his hand and Slugger was sniffing his foot and Miss Trixie was rubbing up against his leg and Admiral was sitting on the ground right in front of his feet, looking up at him, and Popeye was jumping up in the air and falling back down again and again to try to get his attention.

You're not supposed to talk to strangers – that's the rule – is what he always finds himself thinking about at times, like now, when he remembers that first day when he met Mrs. Delgado, but then he also always remembers that he never *broke* the rule because he *didn't* talk to Mrs. Delgado. He didn't even *look* at Mrs. Delgado, not even at her ear. He just looked at all the perked up ears and hanging out tongues and wagging back and forth tails and wet black noses that had gathered all around him, and he's pretty sure that the rule was only meant to be about *people* strangers, not *dog* strangers. And *anyway*, he hadn't actually talked to *them* either, but he sure had looked at them.

No clues he had to worry about reading there, is what he'd noticed right away. All the mouths were open with tongues hanging out of them, and all the eyebrows were so furry you'd never know if they were moving up or scrunching down, and all the skin was black and white and brown and dotted and definitely not turning pale or red. And he could even look *right* into all the big brown eyes without feeling that dropping elevator feeling in his stomach because he saw the same exact thing in all of them, which was *them* asking *him* if *he'd* be *their* friend.

The other thing he'd noticed is that, even though none of them was exactly respecting his personal space, it didn't make him feel the way it did when people stood too close to him or touched him or bumped into him. It just made him feel like laughing and getting into *their* personal space, which was what he was doing – kneeling down to pet Popeye and hug Admiral and

scratch Miss Trixie's stomach and shake first Slugger's paw and then Cha-cha's – when his mother finished talking and came over to them.

“My, you sure have your hands full,” she'd said to Mrs. Delgado, who had said, “Jes, it is today my first day I am having this job.”

“I'm Judith Koppelman,” his mother had said then, “and this is my son, Ben. It's nice to meet you.”

“I am Graciela Delgado, and this is a Slugger and Cha-cha and Miss a Trixie and Popeye and Admiral.”

That's how she'd said it, but he'd known, of course, that that wasn't the right way to talk about them, all mixed up like that and not in any special order, and that when he wrote their names in his List Book, which he'd already known he'd be doing as soon as he got to school, he'd put them in *alphabetical* order, so that's who they became in his mind, right then and there: His five new friends – Admiral, Cha-cha, Miss Trixie, Popeye and Slugger. Who he told Mrs. Montgomery about the minute he walked into her room after lunch that day. “Really?” she'd said, and she'd sat back fast in her chair. “FIVE new FRIENDS all in one DAY?” Yep, he'd said, so he should get an A+ for his homework today, that's for sure. Only then, after he'd shown her the list of their names in his List Book, she'd kind of looked the way his bicycle tire did that time when he rode it over a nail, and she'd said, “Oh, I see.”

Which she didn't, he could tell. She *didn't* see that these friends were just as good as – even *better* than – friends who don't have perking up ears and hanging out tongues and wet black noses and wagging back and forth tails. She didn't see that he could have these friends *instead* of the kind who move in bunches and high five each other and slap each other's backs and look into each other's faces all the time. “I think you need to work on being flexible,” he'd told her, and that had made the air go right back into her and she'd sat up straight and put her elbows on the table they were sitting at and said, “Okay. Maybe you're right. Why don't you explain this to me.”

And so that's what he'd done – explained to her that these were for sure his friends because they would be there for him when he was having a bad time, which is what he has *every* morning on the way to school, and

that they would also *help* him, the way they already did today, to not have to piano pedal anymore, which he hadn't had to do the whole rest of the way to school after he'd played with them because he'd been too busy thinking about them to notice the popcorn popping all around him, and *that* would mean that he would do better in math like he already did this morning, because he hadn't been so tired and spacey by the time he got to school, and that they would *also* help him to not have to beg his mother every morning to pleeeeeeease drive him just todaaaaaaaaaaaaaaay, which he still does on a lot of mornings, even though he knows it means he won't get extra stickers, because now he won't have that elevator feeling in his stomach and a warning light on inside him as soon as he walks out the door.

And then he'd turned to the page of his List Book where he'd copied down the School Day Morning Routine list at the beginning of the year, and he made a few changes to it and then turned it around toward her so that she could read how it would now be:

1. Get out of bed.
2. Get dressed.
3. Eat breakfast.
4. Brush teeth.
5. Put on coat.
6. Pick up backpack.
7. Walk out door.
8. Walk to bottom of hill.
9. See friends waiting at top of hill.
10. Play with friends.
11. Walk to school.
12. Have a good day

"Okay, okay," she'd said, and her mouth had turned up. "You win." And, even though he hadn't even known they were playing a game, he felt like he really *had* won.

But then, when he'd showed his mother the list after school, *her* mouth had turned down. "Mrs. Delgado may not be there tomorrow," she'd said. "I don't want you to count on seeing her every morning."

"But she *has* to be there," he'd reminded her. "That's her *job*. The rule

is that you go to your job *every* day.”

“Some jobs aren’t every day jobs, honey,” she’d said, “and even if this one is, she may not be there at the exact same time. The rule is *also* that *you* can’t be late for school, remember? I’ll talk to her tomorrow if she’s there, and we’ll see.”

“I hate We’ll See,” he’d reminded her.

“I know,” she’d reminded him back.

But the next morning, Mrs. Delgado had said, “Oh jes. I am coming here every day in the weekadays when the people, they no have it the atime for give a long walk to the adogs. So this is why they give it to me, this yob. And jes, I will be here always at the asame atime *por que* I have ato ago then to another yob, so is okay. I will be here is for sure.”

Which was how he had started actually *liking* walking to school. And which was how everything had gotten better except for one thing, which was that he didn’t get those extra stickers anymore since his mother said that stickers were only for doing hard things, and she had a feeling that maybe *she’d* be the one who should be getting stickers because she could just see that they’d be walking to school every single day from now on, even in the rain and the sleet and the snow. And he’d said, of course they would, look at the list. If he skipped eight, nine, ten and eleven, how was he supposed to get to twelve and have a good day? “Ah, well, if Graciela can take the weather, I suppose I can too,” she’d said.

Graciela is what she called Mrs. Delgado because, while he was playing with Admiral and Cha-cha and Miss Trixie and Popeye and Slugger every morning, they would always be talking, so if his mother had had Making New Friends homework, she would have gotten a good grade on it, too. Maybe not an A+, though, which is what *he* got the day Mrs. Delgado also became *his* friend. He knew right away that she was his friend that day because she was there for him when he was having a bad time, which was exactly what he was having after he’d gotten all tangled up in the leashes and ended up down on the ground on his side in the kind of way that he knew would have made the kids on the playground laugh and point at him and call out, “Koppelklutz!” or “Way to go, Slide!” or “Show ‘em how it’s done, loser!” but which had only made Mrs. Delgado

say – after she had helped him get untangled and get back on his feet – “Oh, this it happen to me, atoo. *Aiii Dios mio*, asomeatime, I think maybe we have here atoo many of the friends. But this adogs, they like very much jou. The boys and the adogs? Like very much one the oter. I know this *por que* I have too a boy who his name is Andreas.”

That’s when he’d heard Mrs. Montgomery’s voice *inside* his head, saying, “Now it’s *your* turn, Ben. This is where you say something about what the other person just said,” so he’d taken a deep breath and said, “Andreas is almost like Andre, which is the name of a man who plays the piano really good. Andre Watts is his whole name. Which is what I do, too, play the piano really good, and in my next recital, I’m going to play Beethoven’s Piano Sonata no. 17 in D minor, which a lot of people call ‘The Tempest,’ but that’s not what Beethoven called it when he was alive, so I don’t either. I don’t either call it that. I just call it Piano Sonata no. 17 in D minor when I’m talking about what I’ll be playing in my next recital, like I just did talk about what I’ll be playing in my next recital when I told it to you, but if I’m talking to Mr. Goldenberg, who’s my piano teacher, I just call it Number 17. Or maybe even just 17. Just 17.”

And then he’d bent down to hug Popeye, which was when Mrs. Delgado had said, “Aseventeen, this is a gud anumber. Andreas, he has aseventeen years,” which is how he’d known that the conversation wasn’t over, even though he had thought that it was, so now it was his turn again, and he began to feel all panicky inside because he couldn’t think of anything else to say about the name Andreas, or about the person Andreas, who he doesn’t even know, or about the number seventeen, so instead, he’d just said the very first thing he could think of, which was, “Why do you talk different than everyone else?” because she *did* talk different than everyone else, so even though he couldn’t think of anything to say about what the person just said, he could at least say something about how she said it, but that’s when he’d seen his mother take a step forward, which had made him think that maybe that wasn’t such a good thing to have said, and that maybe it was even a *rude* thing to have said, and that maybe now he was going to lose a sticker, only he didn’t think he *should* lose a sticker because he hadn’t said she talked *bad*, just that she talked *different*, only *that* made him think about

how maybe different *is* bad, because *he's* different and a lot of people think *that's* bad, so he'd started to feel even *more* panicky inside and almost like he might have to flap his hands up and down, but that was when Mrs. Delgado had laughed.

She'd *laughed*, which Mrs. Montgomery had said means a person is happy or amused or embarrassed, so at least he knew that what he'd said hadn't made her angry or hurt, and that it might have even made her happy or amused, and then, just as he was starting to worry that maybe it had made her embarrassed and he was *still* going to lose a sticker, she'd said, "I talk different *por que* I am born in Mehico," and when he'd looked really fast at her face, just for a second and then away, he'd seen that her mouth was turned up, so *that* meant that she was feeling happy or friendly or proud, so maybe he'd done okay.

Only now it was his turn *again* because she'd just said something new (and see? It *had* been different again, the way she'd said it, but he sure wasn't going to say *that* just in case there *would* go a sticker), so instead he'd said, "Mexico is where Mexican Beaded Lizards live. There are only two species of lizards in the whole world that have dangerous venom, and they're one of them. The other is the Gila Monster."

"This is very much interesting." That's what Mrs. Delgado had said then, and, out of the corner of his eye, he'd seen her eyebrows move up. Startled or surprised. She really *did* think it was interesting! Which had made him feel the way he'd felt in P.E. on that day when they were playing volleyball and Gregory Chin had passed the ball to him really fast and everyone, of course, thought he would miss it because he almost always misses everything in P.E., no matter what kind of ball it is, but that time he'd gotten it anyway and had sent it whizzing right back over the net. "Keep it going!" Mrs. Montgomery was saying inside his head, so he kept it going.

Boy, did he keep it going. "When lizards feel like they're in danger, they can lose their tails to escape and then grow another one later," he'd said while he was scratching Miss Trixie's head. "Lizards smell by tasting the air around them, which is why their tongues go in and out like that," he'd said while he was petting Cha-cha. "There are more than 5,600

species of lizards and the largest one of all is the Komodo Dragon, which can grow to be up to ten feet long," he'd said while he was feeding Slugger the crust of toast he'd saved from his breakfast and stuck in his jacket pocket for him. "Some lizards have no legs," he'd said. "Lizards have been on the Earth for more than two hundred million years," he'd said. "Lizards live everywhere in the world except Antarctica," he'd said. "Lizards grow for their entire lives," he'd said. "Lizards shed their skin when they grow out of it," he'd said. "Some species of lizards can squirt blood from their eyes," he'd said. Which is when his mother had *really* stepped forward, and which was when *she* had said, "I think we'd better get going, kiddo, or we'll be late for school." And that's when Mrs. Delgado had said to her, "Jour ason has very much asmart. Like my ason, too. My ason who he go to the high aschool, he has very much asmart, too, so I know how much it is a very agood ting, to have a very asmart ason."

All the way to school that day, he kept hearing her say that, that he was smart. And even all day and all night, he'd remembered it, so when he saw her again the next morning, he wasn't so afraid of talking to her, too, while he talked to Admiral and Cha-cha and Miss Trixie and Popeye and Slugger. After that, he reminded himself every morning that she'd said that, and that made it easier to talk to her. No one but his parents and his teachers had ever called him that before, and when his teachers did, it mostly seemed like they were sighing, like the next word after smart was always *but*. What he mostly ever remembers people calling him are the kinds of things those two boys had called him when he tried to be their friend. Those kinds of things, and Retard.

Which is what he had heard someone do this morning after he'd realized that the day had broken all apart and had had his meltdown right there on Kimball Lane. He pulls the blanket down from over his head and listens to his mother's mmmm-mmmm-MMMM-mmmmm turn into words. "... no choice but to bring him back home. I couldn't get through no matter what I . . ." he hears her say, and pulls the blanket back up. Of *course* she couldn't get through because she had been talking in her slow, quiet voice and the voice in his head had been TALKING SO MUCH LOUDER.

"I need you to get your control and I need you to remember how important it is to be

flexible," she had been saying, while that voice in his head had been saying, "YOUR FRIENDS ARE ALL GONE!"

"Maybe they're just late. Maybe they'll be here any minute."

"NOW YOU CAN'T HAVE A GOOD DAY BECAUSE NINE AND TEN ARE MISSING FROM THE LIST. THE RULE IS THAT IF YOU DON'T GO THROUGH NINE AND SEE YOUR FRIENDS WAITING AT THE TOP OF THE HILL, AND THEN GO THROUGH TEN AND PLAY WITH YOUR FRIENDS, YOU CAN'T GET TO ELEVEN AND WALK TO SCHOOL SO THAT YOU CAN GET TO TWELVE AND HAVE A GOOD DAY. TWELVE IS 'HAVE A GOOD DAY' AND NOW YOU CAN'T GET THERE, TO TWELVE, WHICH IS 'HAVE A GOOD DAY,' SO EVERYTHING'S ALL RUINED. SO EVERYTHING'S ALL RUINED AND NOW YOU'LL HAVE A *TERRIBLE, HORRIBLE* DAY."

"We'll just wait here for a few minutes and see if they come."

"YOU DON'T *HAVE* A FEW MINUTES. THE RULE IS YOU CAN'T BE LATE FOR SCHOOL."

"I need you to work on being okay with this disappointment."

"THE WHOLE ENTIRE DAY IS RUINED AND BROKEN ALL APART. NOW YOU'RE GOING TO HAVE A TERRIBLE, HORRIBLE, ITCHY, SCRATCHY, TOO TIGHT DAY THAT WILL BE JUST LIKE THAT SWEATER YOUR MOTHER'S AUNT HELEN MADE FOR YOU THAT YOU HAD TO PUT ON LONG ENOUGH FOR YOUR FATHER TO TAKE YOUR PICTURE IN IT BECAUSE YOUR MOTHER'S AUNT HELEN WHO YOU DON'T EVEN KNOW WHO SHE IS BECAUSE YOU NEVER EVEN MET HER WORKED HARD ON IT AND YOU HAD TO REMEMBER YOUR MANNERS FOR AS LONG AS IT WOULD TAKE TO HAVE

THAT PICTURE TAKEN EVEN THOUGH THAT SWEATER MADE IT SO YOU COULDN'T EVEN BREATHE. ONLY *THIS* TIME IT WILL BE A *DAY* AND NOT A *SWEATER* THAT WILL BE ITCHY AND SCRATCHY AND TOO TIGHT AND MAKING IT SO YOU CAN'T BREATHE, SO THERE WON'T BE A CAMERA CLICK THAT MEANS YOU CAN TAKE IT OFF AND ROLL IT IN A BALL. YOU WON'T *EVER* BE ABLE TO TAKE IT OFF AND ROLL IT IN A BALL BECAUSE YOU CAN'T *TAKE* A DAY OFF ONCE YOU'RE IN IT. THAT'S THE RULE."

"Maybe Mrs. Delgado is sick. They'll probably be right back here tomorrow."

"YOU HATE PROBABLY. YOU CAN'T COUNT ON PROBABLY, SO PROBABLY DOESN'T COUNT."

Which had been when the first bell had rung and he had looked around and seen that most of the children had already turned the corner onto Green Bay Road. There were just a few small bunches of them left and all the kids in all of them were staring right at him. "Retard," he heard someone say, and then someone else said, "shhhh" and they all turned and walked away and then there was no one else left.

"Okay, honey, you know what that bell means."

"YOU ONLY HAVE TEN MINUTES LEFT BEFORE YOU HAVE TO LINE UP AT THE DOOR. THAT'S JUST SIX HUNDRED SECONDS BEFORE YOU HAVE TO BE LINED UP IN THE EXACT RIGHT ORDER, WHICH IS THE ORDER WHERE YOU GET TO BE THE VERY FIRST PERSON SO YOU CAN WALK WITH MRS. SANTAYA SO NO ONE BUMPS INTO YOU OR POKES YOU OR PUSHES UP AGAINST YOU, WHICH WOULD MAKE YOU HAVE TO SCREAM, 'DON'T TOUCH ME!' WHICH WOULD BE A VERY BAD THING BECAUSE THE RULE IS THAT THERE'S NO TALKING IN THE HALLS."

"Twenty stickers. You pull yourself together now and we go to school and you get *twenty*

stickers added to your chart. But now means *now*. If we don't leave *now*, we'll miss the *second bell*."

"THE RULE IS IF YOU MISS THE SECOND BELL, THEY LOCK THE DOOR. THE RULE IS IF THE DOOR IS LOCKED, YOU HAVE TO BUZZ THE VERY LOUD BUZZER THAT HURTS YOUR EARS AND MAKES YOUR HEART JUMP AND YOUR SKIN PRICKLE SO THAT THEY'LL OPEN IT FOR YOU. THE RULE IS IF THEY HAVE TO OPEN THE DOOR FOR YOU, YOU HAVE TO GO TO THE OFFICE TO TELL WHY YOU'RE LATE TO A LADY WITH HIGH HAIR WHO LOOKS RIGHT INTO YOUR FACE. SEE? YOUR TERRIBLE, HORRIBLE, ITCHY, SCRATCHY, TOO TIGHT DAY IS ALREADY STARTING."

"Oh, BENnie!" Suddenly his mother had been using her regular voice and it had even been going up, like maybe she was even *happy*. "There's Cha-cha! And, oh, look over THERE. There's Admiral! Those must be their owners they're with. SEE? It's just like I SAID. Mrs. Delgado must be sick today. But doesn't it make you feel BETter to see that your FRIENDS are oKAY?"

His *friends* were *not* okay. His *friends* were *not* supposed to be all *over* the place like that, like they were all floating away. His *friends* were supposed to be all bunched up and *close* to each other: Admiral, Cha-cha, Miss Trixie, Popeye, Slugger. Like that. Just like that. Not blown all apart. Not like the world was spinning too fast for them to hold *onto* each other. Admiral, Cha-cha, Miss Trixie, Popeye, Slugger. *That's* how they were supposed to be: Admiral, Cha-cha, Miss Trixie, Popeye, Slugger. The world was spinning too fast and he had to try to spin even faster than it was so he could get it back into control. AdmiralCha-chaMissTrixie,PopeyeSlugger AdmiralChachaMissTrixiePopeyeSlugger. He had to spin and stomp his

feet and flap his arms and moan and scream. That's what he had to do, which he suddenly realized someone was already doing, because now he could hear them, the moans and the screams, filling up his ears and his head and his stomach and his skin and his heart.

And the next thing he knew, here he was, in his safe place, listening to his mother mmmmmmm-MMMM-mmmmmmming in the kitchen down the hall. Well, she *should* call his father even though he's busy being a doctor in his office. What bigger emergency can there *be* than a whole broken apart *day*? Only something he's starting to notice is that she's been on the phone a long, long time and so far she hasn't hung up and come into the living room and kneeled down in front of him and said, "Okay, this is what your father and I will do to make this better." Which is making him think that maybe she won't be doing that at all, and *that's* making him think that maybe there's even *more* to being a working-on-being-flexible fourth grader than getting used to Instead and Unless and Together and We'll See. That maybe another part of being a working-on-being-flexible fourth grader is starting to understand that there are some things in this world that, no matter how loud you scream or how fast you spin or how hard you flap your hands, can't anyway ever be fixed.