

KATHERINE APPLLEGATE

Crenshaw



From the Newbery Medal-Winning author of *The One and Only Ivan*

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for Jake

Dr. Sanderson:

“Think carefully, Dowd. Didn’t you know somebody, sometime, someplace by the name of Harvey? Didn’t you ever know anybody by that name?”

Elwood P. Dowd:

“No, no, not one, Doctor. Maybe that’s why I always had such hopes for it.”

—MARY CHASE, *Harvey* (1944)

PART ONE

A door is to open

—A HOLE IS TO DIG: A FIRST BOOK OF FIRST DEFINITIONS.

written by Ruth Krauss and illustrated by Maurice Sendak

1

I noticed several weird things about the surfboarding cat.

Thing number one: He was a surfboarding cat.

Thing number two: He was wearing a T-shirt. It said CATS RULE, DOGS DROOL.

Thing number three: He was holding a closed umbrella, like he was worried about getting wet. Which, when you think about it, is kind of *not* the point of surfing.

Thing number four: No one else on the beach seemed to see him.

He'd grabbed a good wave, and his ride was smooth. But as the cat neared shore, he made the mistake of opening his umbrella. A gust of wind yanked him into the sky. He missed a seagull by seconds.

Even the gull didn't seem to notice him.

The cat floated over me like a furry balloon. I looked straight up. He looked straight down. He waved.

His coat was black and white, penguin style. He looked like he was heading somewhere fancy in a hairy tuxedo.

He also looked awfully familiar.

"Crenshaw," I whispered.

I glanced around me. I saw sand-castle builders and Frisbee tossers and crab chasers. But I didn't see anyone looking at the floating, umbrella-toting surfer cat in the sky.

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

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

I felt a little dizzy. But that happens sometimes when I'm hungry. I hadn't eaten since breakfast.

When I opened my eyes, I sighed with relief. The cat was gone. The sky was endless and empty.

Whap. Inches from my toes, the umbrella landed in the sand like a giant dart.

It was red and yellow plastic, decorated with pictures of tiny smiling mice. On the handle, printed in crayon, were the words THIS BUMBERSHOOT BELONGS TO

CRENSHAW.

I closed my eyes again. I counted to ten. I opened my eyes, and the umbrella—or the bumbershoot, or whatever it was—had vanished. Just like the cat.

It was late June, nice and warm, but I shivered.

I felt the way you do the instant before you leap into the deep end of a pool.

You're on your way to somewhere else. You're not there yet. But you know there's no turning back.

2

Here's the thing: I am not an imaginary friend kind of guy.

Seriously. This fall I go into fifth grade. At my age, it's not good to have a reputation for being crazy.

I like facts. Always have. True stuff. Two-plus-two-equals-four facts. Brussels-sprouts-taste-like-dirty-gym-socks facts.

Okay, maybe that second one's just an opinion. And anyway, I've never eaten a dirty gym sock so I could be wrong.

Facts are important to scientists, which is what I want to be when I grow up. Nature facts are my favorite kind. Especially the ones that make people say *No way*.

Like the fact that a cheetah can run seventy miles per hour.

Or the fact that a headless cockroach can survive for more than two weeks.

Or the fact that when a horned toad gets mad it shoots blood from its eyes.

I want to be an animal scientist. I'm not sure what kind. Right now I really like bats. I also like cheetahs and cats and dogs and snakes and rats and manatees. So those are some options.

I like dinosaurs, too, except for them all being dead. For a while, my friend Marisol and I both wanted to be paleontologists and search for dinosaur fossils. She used to bury chicken bone leftovers in her sandbox for digging practice.

Marisol and I started a dog-walking service this summer. It's called See Spot Walk. Sometimes when we're walking dogs, we'll trade nature facts. Yesterday she told me that a bat can eat 1,200 mosquitoes in an hour.

Facts are so much better than stories. You can't see a story. You can't hold it in your hand and measure it.

You can't hold a manatee in your hand either. But still. Stories are lies, when you get right down to it. And I don't like being lied to.

I've never been much into make-believe stuff. When I was a kid, I didn't dress up like Batman or talk to stuffed animals or worry about monsters under my bed.

My parents say, when I was in pre-K, I marched around telling everybody I

was the mayor of Earth. But that was just for a couple of days.

Sure, I had my Crenshaw phase. But lots of kids have an imaginary friend.

Once my parents took me to see the Easter Bunny at the mall. We stood on fake grass next to a giant fake egg in a giant fake basket. When it was my turn to pose with the bunny, I took one look at his paw and yanked it right off.

A man's hand was inside. It had a gold wedding ring and tufts of blondish hair.

"This man is not a rabbit!" I shouted. A little girl started bawling.

The mall manager made us leave. I did not get the free basket with candy eggs or a photo with the fake rabbit.

That was the first time I realized people don't always like to hear the truth.

3

After the Easter Bunny incident, my parents started to worry.

Except for my two days as mayor of Earth, I didn't seem to have much of an imagination. They thought maybe I was too grown-up. Too serious.

My dad wondered if he should have read me more fairy tales.

My mom wondered if she should have let me watch so many nature shows where animals eat each other.

They asked my grandma for advice. They wanted to know if I was acting too adult for my age.

She said not to worry.

No matter how adult I seemed, she told them, I would definitely grow out of it when I became a teenager.

4

A few hours after my Crenshaw sighting at the beach, he appeared again.

No surfboard this time. No umbrella.

No body, either.

Still. I knew he was there.

It was about six in the evening. My sister, Robin, and I were playing cerealball in the living room of our apartment. Cerealball is a good trick for when you're hungry and there's nothing much to eat till morning. We invented it when our stomachs were grumbling to each other. *Wow, I would love a piece of pepperoni pizza*, my stomach would growl. And then hers would grumble, *Yeah, or maybe a Ritz cracker with peanut butter*.

Robin loves Ritzes.

Cerealball is easy to play. All you need are a few Cheerios or even a little piece of bread all torn up. M&M's would be good too, if your mom isn't around to say no sugar. But unless it's right after Halloween you probably don't have any.

In my family those guys go really fast.

First you pick a target to throw at. A bowl or cup works fine. Don't use a wastebasket, because that might have germs. Sometimes I use Robin's T-ball cap. Although that's probably pretty gross, too.

For a five-year-old, that girl can really sweat.

What you do is throw your one piece of cereal and try to make a basket. The rule is you can't eat that piece until you score. Make sure your target's far away or you'll finish your food too fast.

The trick is that you take so long to hit the target, you forget about being hungry. For a while, anyway.

I like to use Cheerios and Robin likes Frosted Flakes. But you can't be picky when the cupboard is bare. My mom says that sometimes.

If you run out of cereal and your stomach's still growling, you can always try chewing a piece of gum to distract yourself. Stuck behind your ear is a good

hiding place if you want to use your gum again. Even if the flavor is gone your teeth get a workout.

Crenshaw showed up—at least he *seemed* to show up—while we were busy throwing my dad’s bran cereal into Robin’s cap. It was my turn to throw, and I got a direct hit. When I went to take out the cereal piece, I found four purple jelly beans instead.

I love purple jelly beans.

I stared a long time at those things. “Where did the jelly beans come from?” I finally asked.

Robin grabbed the cap. I started to pull it away, but then I changed my mind. Robin is small, but you don’t want to mess with her.

She bites.

“It’s magic!” she said. She started dividing up the jelly beans. “One for me, one for you, two for me—”

“Seriously, Robin. Stop kidding around. Where?”

Robin gobbled down two jelly beans. “Shlp tchzzzn muh,” she said, which I figured meant “stop teasing me” in candy-mouth.

Aretha, our big Labrador mutt, rushed over to check things out. “No candy for you,” Robin said. “You are a dog so you eat dog food, young lady.”

But Aretha didn’t seem interested in the candy. She was sniffing the air, ears cocked toward the front door, as if we had a guest approaching.

“Mom,” I yelled, “did you buy some jelly beans?”

“Sure,” she called back from the kitchen. “They’re to go with the caviar.”

“I’m serious,” I said, picking up my two pieces.

“Just eat Dad’s cereal, Jackson. You’ll poop for a week,” she answered.

A second later she appeared in the doorway, a dish towel in her hands. “Are you guys still hungry?” She sighed. “I’ve got a little mac and cheese left over from dinner. And there’s half an apple you could share.”

“I’m fine,” I said quickly. Back in the old days, when we always had food in the house, I would whine if we were out of my favorite stuff. But lately we’d been running out of everything, and I had the feeling my parents felt lousy about it.

“We have jelly beans, Mom,” Robin said.

“Well, okay, then. As long as you’re eating something nutritious,” said my mom. “I get my paycheck at Rite Aid tomorrow, and I’ll stop by the grocery store and pick up some food after work.”

She gave a little nod, like she’d checked something off a list, and went back to the kitchen.

“Aren’t you gonna eat your jelly beans?” Robin asked me, twirling her yellow

ponytail around her finger. “Because if you want me to do you a big favor I guess I could eat them for you.”

“I’m going to eat them,” I said. “Just not ... yet.”

“Why not? They’re purple. Your favorite.”

“I need to think about them first.”

“You are a weirdo brother,” said Robin. “I’m going to my room. Aretha wants to play dress-up.”

“I doubt that,” I said. I held a jelly bean up to the light. It looked harmless enough.

“She especially likes hats and also socks,” Robin said as she left with the dog. “Don’t you, baby?”

Aretha’s tail wagged. She was always up for anything. But as she left with Robin, she glanced over her shoulder at the front window and whined.

I went to the window and peered outside. I checked behind the couch. I flung open the hall closet.

Nothing. Nobody.

No surfing cats. No Crenshaw.

I hadn’t told anybody about what I’d seen at the beach. Robin would just think I was messing with her. My mom and dad would do one of two things. Either they’d freak out and worry I was going crazy. Or they’d think it was adorable that I was pretending to hang out with my old invisible friend.

I sniffed the jelly beans. They smelled not-quite-grapey, in a good way. They looked real. They felt real. And my real little sister had just eaten some.

Rule number one for scientists is this: There is always a logical explanation for things. I just had to figure out what it was.

Maybe the jelly beans weren’t real, and I was just tired or sick. Delirious, even.

I checked my forehead. Unfortunately, I did not seem to have a fever.

Maybe I’d gotten sunstroke at the beach. I wasn’t exactly sure what sunstroke was, but it sounded like something that might make you see flying cats and magic jelly beans.

Maybe I was asleep, stuck in the middle of a long, weird, totally annoying dream.

Still. Didn’t the jelly beans in my hand seem extremely real?

Maybe I was just hungry. Hunger can make you feel pretty weird. Even pretty crazy.

I ate my first jelly bean slowly and carefully. If you take tiny bites, your food lasts longer.

A voice in my head said, *Never take candy from strangers.* But Robin had

survived. And if there was a stranger involved, he was an invisible one.

There had to be a logical explanation. But for now, the only thing I knew for sure was that purple jelly beans tasted way better than bran cereal.

5

The first time I met Crenshaw was about three years ago, right after first grade ended.

It was early evening, and my family and I had parked at a rest stop off a highway. I was lying on the grass near a picnic table, gazing up at the stars blinking to life.

I heard a noise, a wheels-on-gravel skateboard sound. I sat up on my elbows. Sure enough, a skater on a board was threading his way through the parking lot.

I could see right away that he was an unusual guy.

He was a black and white kitten. A big one, taller than me. His eyes were the sparkly color of morning grass. He was wearing a black and orange San Francisco Giants baseball cap.

He hopped off his board and headed my way. He was standing on two legs just like a human.

“Meow,” he said.

“Meow,” I said back, because it seemed polite.

He leaned close and sniffed my hair. “Do you have any purple jelly beans?”

I jumped to my feet. It was his lucky day. I just happened to have two purple jelly beans in my jeans pocket.

They were a little smushed, but we each ate one anyway.

I told the cat my name was Jackson.

He said yes, of course it is.

I asked him what his name was.

He asked what did I want his name to be.

It was a surprising question. But I had already figured out he was a surprising guy.

I thought for a while. It was a big decision. People care a lot about names.

Finally I said, “Crenshaw would be a good name for a cat, I think.”

He didn’t smile because cats don’t smile.

But I could tell he was pleased.

“Crenshaw it is,” he said.

6

I don't know where I got the name Crenshaw.

No one in my family has ever known a Crenshaw.

We don't have any Crenshaw relatives or Crenshaw friends or Crenshaw teachers.

I'd never been to Crenshaw, Mississippi, or Crenshaw, Pennsylvania, or Crenshaw Boulevard in Los Angeles.

I'd never read a book about a Crenshaw or seen a TV show with a Crenshaw in it.

Somehow Crenshaw just seemed right.

Everybody in my family was named after somebody or something else. My dad was named after his grandpa. My mom was named after her aunt. My sister and I weren't even named after people. We were named after guitars.

I was named after my dad's guitar. It was designed by a manufacturer called Jackson. My sister was named after the company that made my mom's guitar.

My parents used to be musicians. Starving musicians is what my mom calls it. After I was born, they stopped being musicians and became normal people. Since they'd run out of instruments, my parents named our dog after a famous singer called Aretha Franklin. That was after Robin wanted to name her Fairy Princess Cutie Pie and I wanted to call her Dog.

At least our middle names came from people and not instruments. Orson and Marybelle were my dad's uncle and my mom's great-grandma. Those folks are dead, so I don't know if they're good names or not.

Dad says his uncle was a charming curmudgeon, which I think means grumpy with some niceness thrown in.

Honestly, another middle name might have been better. A brand-new one. One that wasn't already used up.

Maybe that's why I liked the name Crenshaw. It felt like a blank piece of paper before you draw on it.

It was an anything-is-possible kind of name.

Z

I don't exactly remember how I felt about Crenshaw that day we met.

It was a long time ago.

I don't remember lots of stuff about what happened when I was young.

I don't remember being born. Or learning to walk. Or wearing diapers. Which is probably not something you want to remember anyway.

Memory is weird. I remember getting lost at the grocery store when I was four. But I don't remember getting found by my mom and dad, who were yelling and crying at the same time. I only know that part because they told me about it.

I remember when my little sister first came home. But I don't remember trying to put her in a box so we could mail her back to the hospital.

My parents enjoy telling people that story.

I'm not even sure why Crenshaw was a cat, and not a dog or an alligator or a Tyrannosaurus rex with three heads.

When I try to remember my whole entire life, it feels like a Lego project where you're missing some of the important pieces, like a robot mini-figure or a monster-truck wheel. You do the best you can to put things together, but you know it's not quite like the picture on the box.

It seems like I should have thought to myself, Wow, a cat is talking to me, and that is not something that usually happens at a highway rest stop.

But all I remember thinking is how great it was to have a friend who liked purple jelly beans as much as I did.