

Bradley Chalkers sat at his desk in the back of the room—last seat, last row. No one sat at the desk next to him or at the one in front of him. He was an island.

If he could have, he would have sat in the closet. Then he could shut the door so he wouldn't have to listen to Mrs. Ebbel. He didn't think she'd mind. She'd probably like it better that way too. So would the rest of the class. All in all, he thought everyone would be much happier if he sat in the closet, but, unfortunately, his desk didn't fit.

"Class," said Mrs. Ebbel. "I would like you all to meet Jeff Fishkin. Jeff has just moved here from Washington, D.C., which, as you know, is our nation's capital."

Bradley looked up at the new kid who was standing at the front of the room next to Mrs. Ebbel.

"Why don't you tell the class a little bit about yourself, Jeff," urged Mrs. Ebbel.

The new kid shrugged.

"There's no reason to be shy," said Mrs. Ebbel.

The new kid mumbled something, but Bradley couldn't hear what it was.

"Have you ever been to the White House, Jeff?" Mrs. Ebbel asked. "I'm sure the class would be very interested to hear about that."

"No, I've never been there," the new kid said very quickly as he shook his head.

Mrs. Ebbel smiled at him. "Well, I guess we'd better find you a place to sit." She looked around the room. "Hmm, I don't see anyplace except, I suppose you can sit there, at the back."

"No, not next to Bradley!" a girl in the front row exclaimed.

"At least it's better than *in front* of Bradley," said the boy next to her.

Mrs. Ebbel frowned. She turned to Jeff. "I'm sorry, but there are no other empty desks."

"I don't mind where I sit," Jeff mumbled.

"Well, nobody likes sitting . . . there," said Mrs. Ebbel.

"That's right," Bradley spoke up. "Nobody likes sitting next to me!" He smiled a strange smile. He stretched his mouth so wide, it was hard to tell whether it was a smile or a frown.

He stared at Jeff with bulging eyes as Jeff awkwardly sat down next to him. Jeff smiled back at him, so he looked away.

As Mrs. Ebbel began the lesson, Bradley took out a pencil and a piece of paper, and scribbled. He scribbled most of the morning, sometimes on the paper and sometimes on his desk. Sometimes he scribbled so hard his pencil point broke. Every time that happened he laughed. Then he'd tape the broken point to one of the gobs of junk in his desk, sharpen his pencil, and scribble again.

His desk was full of little wads of torn paper, pencil points, chewed erasers, and other unrecognizable stuff, all taped together.

Mrs. Ebbel handed back a language test. "Most of you did very well," she said. "I was very pleased. There were fourteen A's and the rest B's. Of course, there was one F, but . . ." She shrugged her shoulders.

Bradley held up his test for everyone to see and smiled that same distorted smile.

As Mrs. Ebbel went over the correct answers with the class, Bradley took out his pair of scissors and very carefully cut his test paper into tiny squares.

When the bell rang for recess, he put on his red jacket and walked outside, alone.

"Hey, Bradley, wait up!" somebody called after him.

Startled, he turned around.

Jeff, the new kid, hurried alongside him. "Hi," said Jeff.

Bradley stared at him in amazement.

Jeff smiled. "I don't mind sitting next to you," he said. "Really."

Bradley didn't know what to say.

"I have been to the White House," Jeff admitted. "If you want, I'll tell you about it."

Bradley thought a moment, then said, "Give me a dollar or I'll spit on you."

There are some kids—you can tell just by looking at them—who are good spitters. That is probably the best way to describe Bradley Chalkers. He looked like a good spitter.

He was the oldest and the toughest-looking kid in Mrs. Ebbel's class. He was a year older than the other kids. That was because he had taken the fourth grade twice. Now he was in the fifth grade for the first, but probably not the last, time.

Jeff stared at him, then gave him a dollar and ran away.

Bradley laughed to himself, then watched all the other kids have fun.

When he returned to class after recess, he was surprised Mrs. Ebbel didn't say anything to him. He figured that Jeff would probably tell on him and that he'd have to give back the dollar.

He sat at his desk in the back of the room—last seat, last row. *He's afraid to tell on me*, he decided. *He knows if he tells on me, I'll punch his face in!* He laughed to himself.

He ate lunch alone too.

As he walked in from lunch, Mrs. Ebbel called him to her desk.

"Who, me?" he asked. He glared at Jeff, who was already sitting down. "I didn't do anything."

“Did you give my note to your mother?” asked Mrs. Ebbel.

“Huh? What note? You never gave me a note.”

Mrs. Ebbel sighed. “Yes I did, Bradley. In fact, I gave you two notes because you said the first one was stolen.”

“Oh, that’s right,” he said. “I gave it to her a long time ago.”

Mrs. Ebbel eyed him suspiciously. “Bradley, I think it’s very important for your mother to come tomorrow.”

Tomorrow was Parents’ Conference Day.

“She can’t come,” said Bradley. “She’s sick.”

“You never gave her the note, did you?”

“Call her doctor if you don’t believe me.”

“The school has just hired a new counselor,” said Mrs. Ebbel. “And I think it’s very important that your mother meet her.”

“Oh, they already met,” said Bradley. “They go bowling together.”

“I’m trying to help you, Bradley.”

“Call the bowling alley if you don’t believe me!”

“Okay, Bradley,” said Mrs. Ebbel, and she let the matter drop.

Bradley returned to his seat, glad that was over. He glanced at Jeff, surprised Jeff hadn’t told on him. As he scribbled he kept thinking about what Jeff had said to him. *Hey, Bradley, wait up. Hi. I don’t mind sitting next to you. Really. I have been to the White House. If you want, I’ll tell you about it.*

It confused him.

He understood it when the other kids were mean to him. It didn't bother him. He simply hated them. As long as he hated them, it didn't matter what they thought of him.

That was why he had threatened to spit on Jeff. He had to hate Jeff before Jeff hated him.

But now he was confused. *Hey, Bradley, wait up. Hi. I don't mind sitting next to you. Really.* The words rolled around in his head and banged against his brain.

After school, he followed Jeff out the door. "Hey, Jeff," he called, "wait up!"

Jeff turned, then started to run, but Bradley was faster. He caught up to Jeff at the corner of the school building.

"I don't have any more money," Jeff said nervously.

"I'll give you a dollar if you'll be my friend," said Bradley. He held out the dollar Jeff had given him earlier.

Jeff slowly reached out, then grabbed it.

Bradley smiled his same twisted smile. "Have you ever been to the White House?" he asked.

"Um . . . yes," said Jeff.

"Me too!" said Bradley. He turned and ran home.

3.

Bradley opened the front door to his house, then made a face. It smelled like fish.

"You're home early," his mother said from the kitchen. She was a large woman with fat arms. She was wearing a sleeveless green dress and holding a butcher knife.

"My friends and me, we raced home," he told her. A fat fish, about the size of one of Mrs. Chalkers' arms, lay on a board on the counter. Bradley watched her raise the knife above the fish, then quickly hack off its head.

He walked down the hall to his room and closed the door. "Hey, everybody," he announced. "Bradley's home!" But he was pretending that it was someone else who was speaking. "Hi, Bradley. Hi, Bradley," he said.

"Hi, everybody," he answered, this time speaking for himself.

He was talking to his collection of little animals. He had about twenty of them. There was a brass lion that he had found one day in a garbage can on the way to school. There was an ivory donkey that his parents had brought back from their trip to Mexico. There were two owls that were once used as salt and pepper shakers, a glass unicorn with its horn broken, a family

of cocker spaniels attached around an ashtray, a raccoon, a fox, an elephant, a kangaroo, and some that were so chipped and broken you couldn't tell what they were. And they were all friends.

And they all liked Bradley.

"Where's Ronnie?" Bradley asked. "And Bartholomew?"

"I don't know," said the fox.

"They're always going off together," said the kangaroo.

Bradley leaned across the bed and reached under his pillow. He pulled out Ronnie the Rabbit and Bartholomew the Bear. He knew they were under his pillow because that was where he had put them before he went to school.

"What were you two doing back there?" he demanded.

Ronnie giggled. She was a little red rabbit with tiny blue eyes glued on her face. One ear was broken. "Nothing, Bradley," she said. "I was just taking a walk."

"Er, I had to go to the bathroom," said Bartholomew. He was a brown-and-white ceramic bear that stood on his hind legs. His mouth was open, revealing beautifully made teeth and a red tongue.

"They were making out!" announced the Mexican donkey. "I saw them kissing!"

Ronnie giggled.

"Oh, Ronnie!" scolded Bradley. "What am I going to do with you?"

She giggled again.

Bradley reached into his pocket and took out a handful of cut-up bits of paper, his language test. "Look, everybody," he said. "I brought you some food!" He dropped the bits of paper onto the bed, then scooped all his animals into it. "Not so fast," he said. "There's plenty for everybody."

"Thank you, Bradley," said Ronnie. "It's delicious."

"Yeah, it's real good," said Bartholomew.

"Don't play with your food," the mother cocker spaniel told her three children.

"Pass the salt," said the pepper owl.

"Pass the pepper," said the salt owl.

"Let's hear it for Bradley!" called the lion.

They all cheered, "Yay, Bradley!"

Ronnie finished eating, then hopped off by herself, singing, "doo de-doo de-doo." Then she said, "I think I'll go swimming in the pond."

The pond was a purple stain on Bradley's bedspread where he had once spilled grape juice.

Ronnie jumped into the water. Suddenly she cried, "Help! I have a cramp!"

"You shouldn't have gone swimming right after eating," Bradley reminded her.

"Help! I'm drowning!"

Bartholomew looked up. "That sounds like Ronnie!" he said. "It sounds like she's drowning in the pond!" He hurried to the pond to rescue her. "Hold on, Ronnie!" he shouted. "I'm—"

The door to Bradley's room swung open and his sis-

ter, Claudia, barged in. She was four years older than Bradley.

“Get out of here!” he snapped at her. “Or I’ll punch your face in!”

“What are you doing?” she teased. “Talking to your little animal friends?” She laughed, showing her braces.

It was Claudia who had broken Ronnie’s ear. She had stepped on it accidentally. She told Bradley it was his fault for leaving his animals strewn all over the floor. He didn’t tell her that Ronnie wasn’t on the floor, but lost in the desert. Instead, he had said, “Who cares? It’s just a stupid red rabbit.”

“Mom wants you,” said Claudia. “She told me to get you.”

“What does she want?”

“She wants to talk to you. Tell your animals you’ll be right back.”

“I wasn’t talking to them,” Bradley insisted.

“What were you doing then?”

“I was arranging them. I was putting them in alphabetical order. It’s a project for school. Call my teacher if you don’t believe me.”

Claudia snickered. Although she always made fun of Bradley’s animals, she had really felt bad when she stepped on the rabbit. She knew it was Bradley’s favorite. She had bought him the bear to make up for it. “What do I want a bear for?” he said when she gave it to him.

Bradley went into the kitchen. The fish, now cut

up and covered with onions, was frying on top of the stove. "You want me?" he asked.

"How's everything at school?" asked his mother.

"Great! In fact, today I was elected class president."

"Your grades are all right?"

"Yes. Mrs. Ebbel handed back a language test today and I got another A. In fact, it was an A plus."

"May I see it?"

"Mrs. Ebbel hung it on the wall, next to all my other A tests."

"Mrs. Ebbel just called," said his mother.

His heart fluttered.

"Why didn't you tell me that tomorrow was Parents' Conference Day?" asked his mother.

"Didn't I tell you?" he asked innocently.

"No, I don't think so."

"I told you," he said. "You said you couldn't go. You must have forgot."

"Mrs. Ebbel seems to think it is important for me to be there," said his mother.

"That's just her job," said Bradley. "The more mothers she sees, the more money she makes."

"Well, I made an appointment with her for eleven o'clock tomorrow morning."

Bradley stared at her in disbelief. "No, you can't go!" he shouted, stamping his foot. "It's not fair!"

"Bradley, what—"

"It's not fair! It's not fair!" He ran into his bedroom and slammed the door behind him.

A moment later his mother knocked on the door. "What is it?" she asked. "What's not fair?"

"It's not fair!" he yelled. "You promised!"

"What did I promise? Bradley? What did I promise?"

He didn't answer. He couldn't until he thought up why it wasn't fair and what she had promised him.

He stayed in his room until Claudia told him that he had to come to dinner. He followed her out to the dining room, where his mother and father were already sitting down.

"Did you wash your hands?" asked their father.

"Yes," Bradley and Claudia lied.

Bradley's father worked in the police department. He had been shot in the leg four years ago while chasing a robber. Now he needed a cane to walk, so he worked behind a desk. He didn't like that kind of work and often came home grumpy and short-tempered.

The police never caught the man who had shot him.

"I hate fish," Bradley said as he sat down.

"So do I," said Claudia. "It sticks to my braces and I taste it for weeks."

"Brussels sprouts make me throw up," said Bradley.

"They smell like old garbage," said Claudia.

"That's enough," said their father. "You'll both eat what's on your plates."

Bradley held his nose with one hand while he picked up a brussels sprout with the other, and put it, whole, into his mouth.

“What’s all this nonsense about your mother breaking her promise?” asked his father.

Bradley was ready. “She promised she’d take me to the zoo tomorrow, and now she won’t!”

“What?” exclaimed his mother. “I never said I’d take you to the zoo.”

“She did too!” said Bradley. “Since there is no school tomorrow, she said she’d take me to the zoo.”

“I didn’t even know there was no school tomorrow until his teacher called me this afternoon,” his mother protested.

“You promised!” said Bradley.

“Okay,” said his father. “Janet, what time is your appointment tomorrow with Bradley’s teacher?”

“Eleven o’clock.”

“Okay, you can go to your appointment and still have time to take Bradley to the zoo, after lunch.”

“But I never said I’d take him to the zoo.”

“You did!” accused Bradley. “And we have to go in the morning. We have to be at the zoo at eleven o’clock!”

Claudia snickered. “Why do you have to be at the zoo at eleven o’clock?”

He glared at her, then turned back to his father. “Because that’s when they feed the lions.”

Claudia laughed.

“She promised she’d take me to see them feed the lions at eleven o’clock,” Bradley insisted.

His mother was flabbergasted. “I—I don’t even *know* when they feed the lions!”

“Eleven o’clock,” said Bradley.

“Don’t lie to your mother,” said his father.

“Really,” said Bradley. “They feed the lions at eleven o’clock.”

“I don’t tolerate lying,” said his father.

“I’m not lying,” said Bradley. “Call the zoo if you don’t believe me.”

“Don’t lie to your mother and don’t lie to me!”

“Call the zoo!”

“Your mother said she never promised to take you to the zoo.”

“She’s lying.” Right after he said it, he knew it was a mistake.

His father turned purple with rage. “Don’t ever call your mother a liar! Now go to your room!”

“Just call the zoo,” Bradley pleaded.

“Maybe I did tell him I’d take him to the zoo,” said his mother.

“See!” said Bradley.

“Keep it up, Bradley,” said his father. “Just keep it up. You want to be a criminal when you grow up? You want to spend your life in jail? I see people just like you every day at the police station. Just keep it up.”

Bradley stared angrily at his father. “Not all criminals go to jail!” he asserted. “What about the man who shot you?”

“I said, go to your room!”

Bradley stood up from the table. “I didn’t want to eat this junk anyway.” He stomped down the hall into his room and slammed the door. Then he opened it

and shouted, "Call the zoo!" one last time, then slammed it again.

He lay on his bed and cried.

"Don't cry, Bradley," said Ronnie. "Everything will be all right."

"You'll think of something, Bradley," said Bartholomew. "You always do. You're the smartest kid in the world."