

1/ 34 Benevolent St.

“Stop kicking that chair now, please. N-o-w,” said Abby, a tolerant mom.

Max stopped kicking his highchair now. He obeyed his mom. Max had to get along with Abby and with his dad Sidney, he reminded himself. He do-mi-ciled with them, with their ideas, their behavior, and their id-i-o-syn-cra-sies, if you sounded it out.

Three and a half, Max Shepherd was tall for his age. He had a high forehead, a pale complexion, and a slim neck. Falling over a pair of ears large for a child and over his forehead, his leonine hair was overgrown. His hair nearly hid his sea-green eyes. Max had the toned body of a swimmer. Today he wore a pair of faded blue jeans, a long sleeve white shirt, and a pair of sneakers. To look at his clothes, he might be a kid in many places of the world these days. Max slouched in his scratched, wooden highchair. He had outgrown this baby’s chair, in his opinion. He waited for a healthy lunch in Abby’s small, outdated kitchen. He held a funny, illustrated book in his hands. Max was teaching himself how to read. Max kicked the heels of his sneakers against the legs of his highchair. His sneakers were green. They had Velcro, not laces.

Max’s home was Apartment #1, 34 Benevolent St., Santa Fe, NM zip 87501. A zip was a code, but not secret. A zip also was a number. Thirty-four was a number, Max told himself, sitting in this baby chair for the final time, he hoped. He had outgrown this minor seat at the table eons ago, he told himself. An eon was a long stretch of time. Our time is the most valuable thing we have, Sidney liked to say. Just now Sidney was holding three green placemats in his gifted hands. Max stared at the kitchen’s wall calendar, where he recognized the numbers 1991.

“One nine nine one,” he told himself. Teaching yourself how to read words and to recognize numbers was not exactly an easy task.

Apartment #1 included two bedrooms with low ceilings of Styrofoam panels from Walmart. The small, dated kitchen displayed the kind of yucky brown carpet that no one likes. Black and red squares tiled the pad’s single bathroom. The tiles there were cracked. The larger of the two bedrooms was Sidney’s noisy workshop, his studio. He, Abby, and baby Lizabeth slept in the smaller bedroom. This second bedroom had a large, walk-in closet with a good-sized window that opened. This space was the sleeping quarters of Max and Leo. The apartment was adequately heated on this winter day.

Standing tall in her plain kitchen, Abby fronted their well-used white Kelvinator. Twenty-nine, Max’s mom was a dirty blonde with a thick waist and broad shoulders. She had time to fix a healthy lunch from, she told Sidney, not cleaning the fridge perfectly today. Abby was not getting high on house cleaning, but she eventually got ’round to her chores. She was, after all, a civilized adult, she said. Sidney grabbed a Tecate from the fridge.

To him, Abby said, “I could care less about perfect.”

She loosened the strings of her white apron, where the words “Feminity Rules” were written in a plain font, she said out loud, closing the refrigerator door left wide open by her man. Abby wore a floral peasant’s skirt from Oaxaca and a white cotton blouse. A series of intertwined red and gold threads embroidered the blouse’s short elastic sleeves. A pair of leather mocs from the Trading Post felt happy on her feet. She might never have afforded a pair of mocs of this quality, if not for a super sale. Max’s mom had the habits of an earth mother at times, she confessed there in the kitchen. Abby was an entomologist practicing her trade, in her opinion, at a low level.

Abby had one prestigious degree, but maybe one was not enough. She was thinking of breaking her brain at the stinky Great Books College for a second degree, when she might afford the tuition, Max heard her say. This kind of scholastic gig was useless for her professionally, said Sidney, but useful maybe for her personal growth, hypothetically.

What, Max asked himself, was a second degree? He was a mal-con-tent in his highchair, hungry, waiting for a late lunch. A second degree was when a kid like himself was quizzed about his private stuff, Max remembered, like when his buddy Richard earlier today *noodged* him to tell a secret. About Leo. Specifically, it was a secret about Leo's looks. This nosy probe into a kid's business took place at Richard's stylish bungalow. Max ignored the request. Max, if he had a secret about Leo, he was not sharing it with a living soul, no one, not Abby nor Sidney. He was a guy that was able to keep a secret, like the secret journey he planned to make one day.

Leo's looks? They were similar to those of Max, especially if you looked inside of him. His activities? Like those of Max. Leo the lion was Max's friend. He was brave.

Abby slaved away at the kitchen counter, dropping two slices of Bunny Bread into the toaster. The only bread, she muttered, the kids will eat, darn it. Sidney grabbed today's mail from the kitchen table.

"Another bill not to be paid," he said. Sidney was not speaking of the bill on the face of a duck. Max told himself.

Sidney spread the two green placemats on the kitchen table, a third on the tray of Max's highchair. Tree tall, Sidney had built the kitchen table *solo ipse* (which is Latin for "by himself"). He was dressed in a pair of paint-splashed white overalls and his tan work boots, substituting the boots for the polka-dot flip-flops on this February day. Sidney normally preferred wearing the stinky old flip-flops. On the warmer days of the year, he wore them

whenever possible. They were a good luck charm. Sidney adjusted his wire-rimmed glasses on his pudgy nose, the goatee on his chin nicely trimmed. When not creating in the studio, his preferred dress was a Deadhead's tee, his light-blue Levi jeans, and a pair of leather sandals. Sidney, loosely speaking, was a starving artist.

Abby pulled the Bunny Bread out of the toaster. To Sidney, she said, "I meant to tell you. Max and I visited with Richard on our way home from the mall this morning. Pleasant visit. He served up a batch of his homemade cookies and, for me, a strong coffee. We had the predictably civilized conversation between us. Brief, but sweet," Abby said, whipping up a nice batch of egg salad.

"Visited with Richard? How's he doin' these days, the doofus?" Sidney asked. "I honestly cannot make up my mind, is he a plus or a minus in our lives?"

Sidney was seen to be clever, Abby witty, in the Santa Fe arts community. They hardly wished to be taken as dilettantes. They were the curious type, shy about being pe-dan-tic. The three of them might come off as a bit *précieux* to an outsider, Richard proclaimed recently, as if an outsider spoke French! He did not need to explain himself. Sidney strongly disagreed with this label, this no-men-cla-ture. His manner was in no way affected, although he certainly could be fastidious. They were mommy and daddy, Max told himself, kicking the wooden highchair. He had to hang in there. He lived with, put up with, them. What else was he going to do? Unless he, like, ran off to an orphanage or to friend's house, if he had the stuff.

Sidney happened to have a funny anecdote about this side of being a child, being the silent observer. The story was about his cousin James. James' dad had grown up during the Depression of the 1930s. His family was poor, he repeatedly told James. He had few toys as a child and little spending money. Today, James' dad was a busy doctor. The family had a

plentiful life. At the dinner table one evening, his dad reminded James for the thousandth time of his privations as a child, telling James how lucky he was to have two pairs of new shoes and a new bicycle, to have this wonderful food to eat. James, age five, said,

“Dad, aren’t you glad you are living with us now?”

Abby chopped away at the hard-boiled eggs in a shiny blue bowl. Sidney leaned against the Kelvinator, his warm can of Tecate in hand.

To him, Abby said, “Honestly, you are not making up your mind about Richard, plus or minus? Big plus. And, please, do not call him a dufus, especially in front of you know who. What if Richard had the magical Gyges ring on his finger with its power to make him invisible, he heard you say this?” she asked, giving Max a wink. Max was Squirmy the Worm in his highchair. He silently said to Abby, my half of an egg-salad sandwich, please. Max was being patient.

Sidney dropped a plastic cup of apple juice on the tray of the highchair.

He said, “If Richard were here, but invisible, I am not sure he would do anything. Half of the time he reminds me of his stories. Lots of talk, little action,” said Sidney.

“Better than action, no thought,” Abby said, *cas-u-is-tic*, giving her man *the look*. The pert expression on Abby’s pretty face was nicely hinting, Max had to guess. Sidney *deliberately* slacked in the thought department at times. Turning her back to the white porcelain sink, Abby said, “Richard’s stories are about folks like us doin’ our thing, pursuing our passions, talking out difficulties, and hanging onto principles, hopefully not selling out to the man. His stories often reveal the beauty of a good conversation. The best of them have some pretty cool action, worth waiting for. Might you imagine Richard writing a book about us one day? He is crazy about Max. If I had not married you, it might’ve been Richard that I partnered with, if he should have

me. Sid, you and Richard are quite *simpatico*. You can speak your mind with Richard, and vice-versa. That is a friend. Cannot speak your mind, not a friend.”

Tossing his can of Tecate into the green plastic recycling bin, Sidney said, “Agreed, I admire Richard. He happens to be a formidable aesthete of sorts. Yet he can be a bit immature or precious at times, you must agree, and something of a Sad Sack?”

“Richard has retained the inner child,” said Abby, placing the lettuce on the Bunny Bread, saying, “Yes, he has a tendency toward depression and melancholy now and again, but mainly when he forgets or refuses to take his pills. Each of us is depressed at times. We are up, down. Pessimist, optimist. Need both for our individual and our collective survival. One warns of danger, the other brings promise,” said Abby in an unusually talkative flow.

Max listened to Abby’s chatter, not kicking his chair. Her chatter was interesting stuff. His mom was a thinker, all right. Abby was speedy today. She had downed a couple of espressos at breakfast.

Abby slopped the Hellman’s mayo into the chopped eggs, when Sidney said, “There is a bigger issue here, you don’t have to remind me. Filter the real from the illusory, especially in times of danger or promise. Thank you, Professor.”

Ignoring the sarcasm, Abby said, “Richard is likely is brightest, the most intuitive among the three of us, isolated as we are. Here is a guy with a sense of humor. How rare is that? Richard is one of a kind, his own man. If he might exaggerate his comic side from time to time, so what? One has to meet him in person, spend time with him, to get what he is about.”

Sidney was giving Max a nice neck message. His turn to get in a few words, please.

He said, “Richard has a sense of humor. It’s rare, agreed. He nonetheless strikes me as being a tad entitled, a bit soft, don’t you think?”

Sidney's tone of voice was curt on this winter day. Max's dad appeared to be grumpy over the d-mn messy apartment, or something, who knew?

"Richard soft, entitled?" Abby asked, no longer mixing. "Only a hardy soul is able to work at the shelter. I, with my own eyes, watched him dish out some tough love there. More than once. Richard kept up a part-time job during every semester of college, always worked a tough summer job. He, evidently, has built up a bit of a bankroll, not an easy task. How? His business. He happens to be our loan company, loan officer, and our financial safety net, Sid. If he should call in our debts, God forbid, we are in danger of losing the kids. Your parents and mine are normally going to agree on absolutely nothing. Yet they each, separately, have threatened to take away the children. Why? They do not want their grandchildren to starve, I repeatedly am told. Speaking of exaggerations! Richard is a keeper. Losing Richard would be like losing Leo. You, surely, do not want that to happen," Abby said.

"Lose Leo? No, of course not. At least for now, Leo is a keeper, and to our credit," said Sidney. "Not every parent in the world, however, is going to encourage this Leo sort of thing. Take my dad. He might crush a child's fantasy before it'd gotten off ground, maybe with a stern scold or worse. Nix that! I am not going to repeat that kind of negative behavior with Max or with baby Liz."