

VERY RICH

ALSO BY POLLY HORVATH

AN OCCASIONAL COW
(Pictures by Gioia Fiammenghi)

NO MORE CORNFLAKES

THE HAPPY YELLOW CAR

WHEN THE CIRCUS CAME TO TOWN

THE TROLLS

EVERYTHING ON A WAFFLE

THE CANNING SEASON

THE VACATION

THE PEPINS AND THEIR PROBLEMS
(Pictures by Marilyn Hafner)

THE CORPS OF THE BARE-BONED PLANE

MY ONE HUNDRED ADVENTURES

NORTHWARD TO THE MOON

MR. AND MRS. BUNNY—DETECTIVES EXTRAORDINAIRE!
(Pictures by Sophie Blackall)

ONE YEAR IN COAL HARBOR

LORD AND LADY BUNNY—ALMOST ROYALTY!
(Pictures by Sophie Blackall)

THE NIGHT GARDEN

VERY RICH

POLLY HORVATH



MARGARET FERGUSON BOOKS
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Margaret Ferguson Books

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To Arnie, Emily, Andrew, Zayda, Bonny, and Mildred

CONTENTS

THE MISTAKE	3
A DINNER INVITATION	18
THE GAMES	25
ONE LAST QUESTION	45
THE PLAN	65
FLOATING	95
THE TIME MACHINE	110
CONEY ISLAND	119
FREDDY AND DELIA	134
AUNT HAZELNUT'S JEWELS	163
KIDNAPPED	179
NEW LIVES	191
THE SUIT	205
THE PRESIDENT	226
HIDING	242
A FRIEND	256
SURPRISE	275
MANY THANKS TO	295

VERY RICH



THE MISTAKE



RUPERT BROWN came from a large family. They lived in a very plain small house on the edge of Steelville, Ohio. Rupert had so many brothers and sisters that it was like living in a small city-state. They crawled over the furniture. They ran in and out of doors. They were big and small and male and female. They all had sandy-brown hair, pinched noses, high cheekbones and narrow lips. They were all thin.

There were so many children in the Brown family that Mrs. Brown claimed not to be able to remember all their names. She often addressed them by “Hey you.” Rupert had siblings he rarely talked to and hardly knew. There were many different alliances within the family, many secrets, many separate lives. Close proximity does not always make for coziness. Sometimes it is just crowded.

Rupert was ten, and he moved among his family largely unnoticed except by his favorite sister,

six-year-old Elise. She, like Rupert, was quiet and shy and spent a lot of time trying to keep out of everyone's way.

One day before Christmas, Rupert's teenage brothers John and Dirk came home with a cat. Because they were often bringing home stolen cats, there was no doubt in anyone's mind about the origin of this cat. It was not a stray. Perhaps they secretly longed for a pet and this is why they did it, although what they told the family was that it was sport.

"Catch and release. Like fly-fishing. Only with cats," explained John as he held the new one up for his mother to see. There was a wistful look in his eyes. Rupert wondered if he was hoping that his mother would fall in love with it and let them keep it.

"Did I not tell you to stop doing that!" shrieked Mrs. Brown, just home from her job cleaning the offices in the steelworks.

She tore across the room, grabbed the cat, and threw it into the backyard. Then she slammed the door.

Elise looked out the window in concern. "The cat isn't moving," she whispered as Rupert joined her.

"I'll check," Rupert whispered back. Their mother had gone to the kitchen to make the thin gruel of oatmeal that, along with other people's kitchen scraps that their father collected every day, passed for dinner nightly.

All the Brown children tiptoed around their mother. Sometimes she lashed out. Sometimes she hoisted one of the younger Browns onto her lap to watch television and cuddled them as if this, this soft and comforting jolly person, was who she really was. Because you never knew which mother would emerge, it was better to err on the side of caution.

It was cold outside and as Rupert approached the cat he was filled with dread. Suppose the cat was injured? What would they do with it? He knew his mother wouldn't let them keep another mouth that needed feeding. He knew there was no money for a vet. He couldn't just let the cat lie there in pain, could he? Would he himself have to *kill* the cat to put it out of its misery? He didn't know how to do this. What if he had to nurse the cat while keeping his mother at bay? What if the cat was *dead*, then what?

Just as he got close enough to the cat to see that it was still breathing, a cop car came down the road and pulled up in front of the Browns' house. Rupert could see it from where he stood hovering over the cat. The patrol car doors opened and two officers got out and went up the walkway. Oh no, oh no! They were coming for his brothers for sure. If they found the cat would they arrest all three of them, John and Dirk and their mother the cat thrower?

As Rupert reached down, the cat looked up in alarm

and heaved itself to its feet to limp off across the yard. One of its legs must have been hurt in the fall. Rupert ran to the cat, partly to help it and partly with the thought of hiding it from the police. He picked it up and carried it to an empty toolshed in the corner of the yard just as the back door opened and Dirk and John ran through the yard, jumped the fence, and took off across the neighbor's property.

"I'll come back for you later, I promise," Rupert murmured to the cat. Then he went swiftly and silently into the house.

"How dare you!" he heard his mother saying to the police officers at the front door. "Hounding us day and night over cats."

"Mrs. Fraser said she saw your sons very clearly pick up the cat and run away with it," said one of the officers, who looked weary.

"Well, search the place!" cried Mrs. Brown. "Search the darn place from top to bottom then and good luck finding your cat!"

"Are you saying you've let the cat go?" asked the other officer, who also looked weary. Both of the policemen had tired, unhappy cop eyes. The eyes of people who had seen all the sad ways people misbehaved and the terrible things they did to each other but who knew that no matter how tired or sad they became, they must keep knocking on doors to sort things out.

Elise went over to Rupert and took his hand. He squeezed hers. Just then Mr. Brown appeared on the porch with a big bag of kitchen scraps.

“The cops *again?*” He pushed his way between them and into the slightly less chilly clime of the house. “Want a half-eaten taco?” he asked one of the cops with expansive hospitality, rooting through his bag among the carrot greens and almost empty chip bags. “It’s here somewhere. It’s got most of the meat in it still.”

“No, thanks,” said the officer, putting up a hand. “I just ate.”

“Part of a Twinkie?”

“No, really.”

“Here’s a bottle of blueberry syrup. I guess they tried it and didn’t like it,” Mr. Brown said.

“There’s a layer of mold on it,” said the officer.

Mr. Brown opened the bottle and took a swig. “Tangy!” he reported.

“About your sons, Mrs. Brown,” the officer tried again.

Mrs. Brown looked daggers at him. The officers glanced at each other. Their eyes took in everything: the broken-down furniture, the dirty children in their filthy, ragged clothes, the freezing air of the house, Elise and Rupert’s frightened faces, the other children who had been one by one creeping up the stairs away from the police and their mother’s wrath.

"We'd like to have a brief chat with them, Mrs. Brown," said one of the officers. "They can't keep this behavior up. Everyone knows they steal cats. People are saying they want something done."

"Yeah, and I bet those people all got their cats back," said Mrs. Brown. "People leave their cats to wander the city and poop in other people's yards, but no one arrests the cats or the cat owners for *that*. I say, if you leave your cat to wander the streets, is it any wonder it occasionally goes missing? You people are always picking on the poor. Coming here saying my children are thieves. You never have any proof, have you? Why don't you spend less time picking on innocent people and more time hustling up some real turkeys for the Christmas turkey baskets. *That* would be useful. *That* would be a public service. Every year it's the same. You deliver a basket that you call a Christmas *turkey* basket. But where's the turkey, I'd like to know? A chicken is more like it. And not even a roaster. A fryer."

"Ma'am, they're just *called* Christmas turkey baskets because, well, that's what they've always been called. Some of the baskets have turkeys. Some have chickens. It depends on what's donated. Now where are your sons?"

"How should I know?" asked Mrs. Brown.

"You tell them to watch themselves," said the officer, shrugging and clearly giving up. "Give the cat back

to Mrs. Fraser and we'll let it go this time. But if they do it again, we're taking them in."

"Yeah, right, I'll do that," said Mrs. Brown. "If you had any proof, you would have arrested them by now. I wasn't born yesterday." And she slammed the door.

When the car had driven away, Elise whispered to Rupert, "How's the cat?"

"Lame," whispered Rupert before he had a chance to think.

"Lame!" cried Elise.

"What's lame?" barked Mrs. Brown, turning a truly terrible face toward them.

"The cat," whispered Rupert.

"Where?"

"In the toolshed," whispered Rupert, shrinking back to the wall.

"Well, get rid of it!" shrieked Mrs. Brown.

"Your mother's strong as a rock," Mr. Brown said, and then snorted with suppressed glee at his own wit. "You know her secret? She's got no feelings! HAR HAR HAR!" He doubled over with exploding laughter.

"She seems to have anger down pat," muttered Dirk, who was coming through the back door, followed by John.

Mrs. Brown glared at both of them so horribly that Mr. Brown choked back his laugh and turned on the television. Dirk and John joined him on the ramshackle

couch and slowly the other children began to drift down the stairs.

Mrs. Brown moved toward the kitchen to sort out the kitchen scraps. As she passed Elise, who was crying quietly over the injured cat and the police visit, she snapped, "Stop that!"

Elise put her thumb in her mouth. She was too old to suck her thumb, but sometimes around her mother it made its way there.

Rupert went out to the toolshed. The cat was lying down licking its front paw. He picked it up and walked the ten blocks to the Frasers' house. It was a harrowing walk, for every moment he expected the cop car to round the corner, see him, and accuse *him* of stealing the cat. He was so worried about this that twice he almost turned around for home, but in the end he feared the police less than he did his mother. Fortunately, he met no one but a man getting off a bus, too focused on scurrying home to wonder what that Brown child was doing with a cat.

When Rupert got to the Frasers' front yard, he gently lowered the cat to the ground, prepared to watch it until it had made its limping way safely to its own door. But the cat had apparently cashed in, if not one of its nine lives, one of its nine recoveries, for whatever limp the cat had had was gone and it ran away from Rupert as quickly as it could.

Rupert found this comforting but worried that the cat would forever after be fearful of people. Perhaps his family had even created a monster who would hiss and scratch anyone who came near. He trudged back home with a heavy heart.

“Is the cat returned?” asked Elise, who was waiting by the front door for him.

“Yes, it’s fine and the limp is gone. Go,” he whispered fiercely, for his mother had just come out of the kitchen after washing the dinner dishes and was casting an eye about looking for an excuse to yell at someone.

Elise ran up to bed.

“What took you so long?” said his mother. “Dinner is over.”

There was never enough food for anyone. They ate quickly when it was ready and without ceremony. Everyone was always hungry. Now, without dinner in his stomach, Rupert felt not just hungry but starving. How long could you starve like this, he wondered as he dragged himself up to bed, before your body began to devour your own bones? He went to sleep and all night dreamt of slithering boneless along the ground.

The next morning Rupert waited in front of the school for Elise, who always walked there a little later than Rupert, who liked to be early. When she approached he went up to her and said, “We could try lining up for the free breakfast again.”

"I'm too scared," said Elise.

"Yeah, me too," said Rupert, and went to lean by the entrance until the bell rang. Elise ran off to her classroom in a different wing.

There was a free breakfast program for hungry children, but he never got to partake of it because the lunch lady who served it didn't like the Browns either. John and Dirk had stolen her cat and it took three days for it to return to her. She never forgave them. As far as she was concerned, all the Browns were tarred with the same larcenous brush. The one time Rupert showed up in line for his free breakfast she gave him such a look that he was shaken to his core and never returned. Neither did his brothers or sisters.

Because Rupert was so thin he should have felt as if he were bursting with health. Doctors now tell you very thin is a healthy state to be in. The healthiest state, really. If you ask them, they will tell you that it would do all of us some good to fast a couple of days a week. It kills off your bad cells so your good cells can flourish. But Rupert, thin as he was, fairly bursting with good cells and no room in his body for the bad ones, didn't feel healthy. Every day he walked home from school, desperately trying to make it to his own porch before the dizziness of hunger overcame him. And every day when he got there he felt like he might faint right on his doorstep.

Once he got home, he would go to his bedroom. There were three bedrooms in the house. One for the boys, one for the girls, and one for Mr. and Mrs. Brown. In the boys' and girls' bedrooms, the younger children slept in the beds and the older ones slept under them. Rupert shared the underneath of a bed with John and Dirk. After school Rupert often lay under the boys' bed garnering his energy so he would have enough to drag himself downstairs when the dinner oatmeal was ready. Then the oatmeal gave him just enough energy to crawl back upstairs and fall asleep. This was his life. A life spent hoping he wouldn't disgrace himself by fainting.

Then one day it happened. He did faint. It happened on a day of very deep snow.

Rupert got up and left for school as usual. In order to get there, he would start out from his house in the very poor people's area on the outskirts of town by the railroad tracks and power station. Houses there were derelict. Then he would pass through the poor but proud part where people with little money made a decent effort to keep their lawns tidy and their steps swept. Next, he came to the middle-class houses, brimming with hedges and gardens and tidy shutters framing what Rupert imagined were only happy, well-fed people, then to the more opulent houses of the rich. And finally, before he got to the school, he trekked past the houses of the very rich.

As he set out, Rupert thought it odd that his mother hadn't made the sparse spoonful-per-person morning oatmeal that morning. And odd that no one had made any tracks before him on the sidewalk. He had to step high and cut through the deep drifts of heavy, wet snow. This was especially taxing as he had no boots, only tennis shoes, but he didn't dare walk in the road. They were never plowed properly and cars were always dovetailing on their slick surfaces. A boy was too apt to be run over there, although this day there seemed to be little traffic and that was yet another odd thing.

Rupert considered giving up and missing school, but he wanted to grow up to do something special. He wasn't sure what yet, but he knew you couldn't do any kind of special thing without school. So he forced himself to trudge forward. *Mind over matter*, he chanted to himself, *mind over matter*. At one point, he sat down and a drift of snow collapsed over him. The wet snow turned his neck red because he had no scarf or hat. He had no coat either. He had to make do by wearing all three shirts he owned, one on top of the other, and a hole-ridden sweatshirt over all. This worked okay until the dead of winter. Then he was not only always hungry, he was always cold. He was nearly frostbitten when he stood up again. So much so, he wasn't sure he could go on. But the happy thought that any moment

he would be inside the heated school kept him going. It was just around the next corner.

Yet when he rounded the corner there were no cars, no children racing about throwing snowballs, no lights, no buses. There was only what appeared to be an empty building. He stared in dismay.

Rupert knew he must have gotten something wrong.

Either this is the weekend, he said to himself, *or it is a professional development day or a holiday*. Mornings were such a blur for him, always tired, always hungry, that except for the absence of the oatmeal, he hadn't even noticed that his family wasn't up preparing for the day. Well, there was nothing for it. He would have to turn around and go home. He would have to try not to faint or freeze to death. *Mind over matter*, he said to himself again, *mind over matter*. At least he had his own tracks to walk back in. He wouldn't have to break the virgin snow with his tennis shoes. It would save a little energy. At least he had *that*. He began the walk home.

First he passed through the very rich people's enclave. There were seven mansions here. All on huge lots with high fences or hedges and gates that defied even the John and Dirk cat stealers of the world. The very rich people were not just safe themselves, their cats were safe.

Rupert was walking in front of one of these gates when it swung open to allow a departing car to pass

through. The gate swung right into Rupert. A curly decorative piece of iron hooked into one of the holes of his sweatshirt and hoisted him up. This was when Rupert fainted. The gate continued opening, causing his unconscious hanging body to bounce against its iron rails. *Bang, bang, bang.*

Rupert was just waking up from his faint with the thought that on top of everything else he was probably going to bruise when the car pulled through the gate and stopped. A woman stuck her head out the window and stared at him.

She said, "Is that a body swinging from the gate, Billington?"

"I do believe you're right, Mrs. Cook," said Billington, who was driving.

"Well, use the electric charge button. That's what it's there for. To deter gate-crashers."

The next thing that happened was a huge jolt of electrical current passed through Rupert's little shop-worn body and caused him to buck and bang hard against the metal gate again. The gate began to close and the car drove on, Mrs. Cook satisfied that this would be the end of such high jinx. Billington, as he drove away, pressed the gate charge button one more time for good measure. This one jolted Rupert into the air and he ended up flying right over the top of the seven-foot hedge and landing on the wrong side of it. That is, on

the *mansion* side. On the snowy lawn of these very rich people. Exactly where no one really wanted him to be. Rupert expected to feel at any second the thick, viscous drool of vicious guard dogs, followed by their sharp, ripping teeth. He had come to find that the worst thing that you anticipated, the worst thing you could even *imagine*, was usually what happened. So he waited patiently to be consumed. He hadn't even the energy to move, let alone fight them off. Whole minutes passed. But no dogs came bounding up to him. No cats either. Clearly these were not animal people.

Rupert started to get up when he heard a voice say, "How did *you* get here?"

It was Turgid Rivers. The richest boy at school. He was in the sixth grade, a grade above Rupert.

"I guess you must live here," said Rupert weakly.

Turgid nodded.

"Nice house," said Rupert.

And then he fainted again.

A DINNER INVITATION

THIS TIME when Rupert woke up he was lying in front of a big, warm fireplace. There was Turgid's small, curious face hanging above, staring at him.

At first he thought he must be in the Riverses' living room—the carpet was so thick and luxurious, the fireplace so large, and the fire in it so roaring—but gradually as he gained full consciousness and began to turn his head this way and that, he realized he was in a bedroom. From the look of the toys, Turgid's bedroom.

"My goodness," said Turgid, "Christmas is always very exciting. You never know what you're going to find. But I didn't expect to find a dead schoolmate on my front lawn. I dragged you in here. You're not very heavy."

"I'm not dead," said Rupert.

"Well, you're not very lively! How did you get past the gate?" asked Turgid.

“As far as I can tell, I got jolted over it by an electric shock,” said Rupert.

“Oh, the security system. But why aren’t you at home with your family? It’s Christmas morning.”

“Is it?” asked Rupert.

“Yes, of course. You must know that, surely,” said Turgid.

“That explains why no one was at school,” said Rupert feebly. He really felt quite ill. Between the starvation and the cold and the electric shocks, he was not at his best.

“You actually went to school?” asked Turgid in amazement. “But wasn’t waking up to a stocking full of toys some kind of clue?”

“We don’t do that. I think I’m going to faint again,” said Rupert sickly.

“Goodness,” said Turgid. “Anything I can do to help? Why do you keep fainting like this? It can’t be normal. Are you ill?”

“I think it’s the hunger,” said Rupert. “But it might be the cold. It’s not the electric jolts, because I felt this way before that happened, so you mustn’t blame yourselves.”

“Oh, no fear, we never blame ourselves around *here*. Well, gosh, what can we do for you? Have some chocolate!” And Turgid grabbed a large chocolate Santa from a pile of trinkets by his bed. “I got it in my stocking.”

“Are you sure?” asked Rupert. “It’s *your* Christmas chocolate.”

“Well, I don’t want you fainting all over the house,” said Turgid.

He broke off a chocolate arm and gave it to Rupert, who sat up and crammed it into his mouth. He immediately felt better. He could feel the chocolate ooze all over his tongue and run down into his stomach, where it awoke a hunger so vast, it was as if the chocolate were a flame thawing Rupert’s frozen insides and igniting the appetite therein.

“More,” croaked Rupert through a mouthful of chocolate and drool.

Turgid gave him the whole Santa and looked politely away. Rupert was a mess.

When Rupert had consumed the Santa and three chocolate Christmas ornaments that Turgid gave him for good measure, he felt much better. That was when he noticed he was wet through and, despite the roaring fire, was shivering madly.

“You need dry clothes,” said Turgid.

He ran to his closet and got the warmest things he could find: sweatpants and a sweatshirt and socks, all fleece. Then he ran to his bathroom to get a towel for Rupert’s drool while Rupert changed.

Rupert was warm and dry and while not full, not fainting from starvation either.

“Thank you. Thank you,” was all he could say.

“Never mind,” said Turgid. “This is rather fun. It’s like having a pet.”

“But I have to get home,” said Rupert. If this really was Christmas, it was the day they got their Christmas turkey basket. It was only once a year. He didn’t want to miss it.

“Oh no,” said Turgid. “You must have Christmas dinner with us. I insist. It may not be our fault, but as a consequence of our security system you’ve had a terrible shock. It must have been Mrs. Cook who gave the order to shock you. She’s our cook. The name is purely coincidental. We don’t for instance call our butler Mr. Butler. His name is Billington and he’s probably the one who actually pressed the button. Although I’m sure it was on Mrs. Cook’s orders. Mrs. Cook is a little too fond of watching people frizzle up from electric jolts. She was leaving to get a Christmas goose because Aunt Hazelnut said it wouldn’t be Christmas without a goose. Mrs. Cook had planned on prime rib. We’ve never had a goose, but Aunt Hazelnut has been reading a lot of Dickens because the librarian living here keeps bringing it home for her—”

“You have your own librarian?” interrupted Rupert in amazement. Oh, these rich people!

“Yes, but it’s not what you think. We don’t employ her. We’re not even quite sure who she is. Well, I

mean, Uncle Moffat should know. What happened was, he made the mistake of offering one of our bedrooms as a raffle prize in a fundraiser. I think he meant for someone to come and just spend the weekend. People are always wanting to know what it's like in the Rivers mansion. This librarian won and moved in with a suitcase and never moved out. We all started politely ignoring her, which is what Uncle Moffat said we should do to whoever won. For their sake as much as ours. You know, let them observe us freely without making them uncomfortable. But instead of going back home Monday she just stayed on and on and we kept ignoring her and she kept spying on us from behind chairs and curtains and such and in the end we simply all got used to the arrangement. I wouldn't say we like it exactly, but she makes herself useful. She brings home books if you let her. Anyhow, I guess they're always chowing down on goose in Dickens, so off Aunt Hazel-nut sent Mrs. Cook for one. Mrs. Cook was in quite a temper. She hates last-minute menu changes. So that's probably why she shocked you. It wasn't personal. She was in a mood. That and her enjoyment of the 'moment of frizzle' as she puts it. So you see, you must have dinner with us. Should I phone your family to let them know?"

"We haven't a phone," said Rupert.

"How odd," said Turgid. "Are you odd people?"

Rupert didn't know how to answer this. He wanted to say no, they were ordinary. Or ordinaryish. They simply couldn't *afford* a phone. However, to say this would be to expose his extreme poverty, which was embarrassing. So he said nothing. Also, he thought, perhaps to a rich person being poor *is* odd.

When Rupert didn't answer, Turgid said, "Well, shall I send Billington to your house to inform your family?"

"That's all right. They won't care," said Rupert before he had time to think.

"Won't care if you miss your own Christmas dinner?" asked Turgid.

Rupert thought if they did notice he was missing, which was unlikely, they would simply be glad there was one less person to fight over the paltry amount of chicken. Except for Elise. She would probably notice he was missing, but even she would most likely be too focused on getting some chicken to be worried. This is what extreme hunger did to people.

"No, we're very casual about those things," said Rupert, knowing he couldn't possibly explain the complications of a life so different from Turgid's own.

"Well, then it's settled."

Someone shouted from downstairs for Turgid. He pulled Rupert with him to the top of the stairs.

"Turgid, darling!" called the voice again from some

recess of the house. "Mrs. Cook couldn't find a goose at the only store open on Christmas, so it's prime rib after all. Everything is ready. Mrs. Cook wants us to eat so she can get out of here. She wants dinner with her own family."

"All right, Mother," Turgid called back. "It's a little early, isn't it?"

It was ten in the morning.

"She's been up cooking since four apparently," Mrs. Rivers's disembodied voice went on. "Come on, let's indulge her. It's Christmas, after all. Aren't you hungry?"

"Not terribly. I've been eating chocolates all morning. Are you hungry, Rupert?" asked Turgid.

"I'm always hungry," said Rupert truthfully.

"Rupert is starving!" called Turgid. "He's having dinner with us. That's all right, isn't it, Mother?"

"Oh good," said Mrs. Rivers. "Someone else for the games. The games are always better with more people."

THE GAMES

A FEW minutes later everyone converged in the dining room.

“Well,” said Uncle Moffat as they all sat down, “it seems every year we eat at a more ridiculous time.”

“Yes, what’s with such an early dinner?” asked Turgid’s little sister, Sippy.

“Are we having an early dinner or are we having roast beef for breakfast, that’s the question,” said Uncle Henry. He was a thin man with a beak of a nose and a mass of unruly white hair.

“Should I tell you who all these people are?” Turgid asked Rupert as Billington set an extra place for him.

“I’ll never remember them all,” said Rupert, thinking, *Get to the food, get to the food.*

“Oh, sure you will. That’s my brother, Rollin, my sister, Sippy. My mother is the stocky one sitting next to you at the head of the table with the blond hair and the weird glasses that make her eyes look like they’re squinting,”

he said quietly so she didn't hear. "That's my father heading up the other end of the table. There's my Uncle Moffat - he's the fat one with the bright red cheeks. He lives here with my cousins, who are all awful. Their names are William, Melanie, and Turgid. You don't have to worry about talking to them. They usually spend the whole of dinner arguing among themselves. Their mother, Aunt Anne, has left to dairy farm in Wisconsin—don't ask. My Uncle Henry is in the purple smoking jacket sitting in front of the fireplace. My Aunt Hazelnut is the stringy, very white powdery lady with the curly red hair next to him. She's easy to remember because she's the only other woman here who isn't my mother."

"Did you say another Turgid? Is it a family name?"

"No, and there was a huge fight about it when Uncle Moffat and Aunt Anne announced they were naming their son Turgid too. Oh, and that's the librarian that I mentioned earlier, spying at us from behind the curtains. I forgot there was another woman here besides Mother and Aunt Hazelnut. I always forget about her at dinners because she doesn't say a lot. We don't know much about her past and don't feel we are familiar enough to ask. But you can ask her anything else. She knows everything. Just try it. Go ahead, try it. Mother thinks she must be a reference librarian."

"Maybe later," said Rupert.

He was feeling shy and overwhelmed. Everyone

was talking at once now and the cacophony filled the room. Mrs. Cook had come in with a tureen and was ladling soup into bowls from the head of the table and Billington was placing them before people.

As the soup reached the other Turgid, he picked up his spoon and began eating when Uncle Henry cried out, "THE CRACKERS!"

"Put your spoon down, Turgid," said Aunt Hazelnut.

"Oh, I hate the crackers," said Mr. Rivers. "What a load of nonsense."

"Nonsense? Everyone loves the crackers," said Uncle Henry, holding up what appeared to Rupert to be a gift-wrapped cylinder with ruffled ends.

He watched at first before trying it with Turgid, as each person took turns pulling on an end of his own cracker and the one belonging to the person next to him. Little explosions occurred, and then the cylinders were ripped open and a paper crown, a joke, and a party favor poured out of each one.

"Everyone, read your joke out loud before we eat," commanded Uncle Henry.

"What did one snowman say to the other?" called out Sippy.

"Do you smell carrot?" screamed Aunt Hazelnut, shrieking with laughter.

"What did one reindeer say to the other?" read Uncle Henry.

"I don't know," said Uncle Moffat.

"Nothing. Reindeer can't talk," read Uncle Henry.

Around the table they went. When it was Rupert's turn, he nervously began to unfold the bit of paper with his joke when Uncle Henry said, "Wait a second. Who are *you*?"

"R-R-R-Rupert," stammered Rupert.

"Well, that doesn't tell us much," said Uncle Moffat.

"He was found on our front lawn, half frozen and fainted dead away," said Turgid.

"Goodness, another librarian?" asked Uncle Henry.

"Don't be ridiculous!" roared Uncle Moffat. "He can't be more than nine years old."

"Ten, almost eleven," corrected Rupert in a whisper.

"People do seem to be just showing up and moving in of late," said Mr. Rivers, who never had been apprised of the circumstances surrounding the librarian. He worked long hours and was often out of the loop, family-news-wise.

"What's wrong with his speaking voice?" asked William.

"Nothing at all, shut up and read your joke," said Turgid.

"He could be a librarian-in-training," said Uncle Henry, ignoring them all. "That would account for the whispering. They are always telling people in libraries to whisper. I bet I'm right! I'm sure I'm right. Am I right, boy?"

“No,” whispered Rupert.

“HA!” said Uncle Moffat.

“I hope you’ve unfrozen,” said Mrs. Rivers kindly.

“Yes, thank you,” whispered Rupert.

“Wait a second!” screamed Mrs. Cook, who was bringing in olives and celery. “Are you the kid I tried to jolt off the gate?”

“It wasn’t my fault,” explained Rupert frantically. “I was walking by and the gate snagged a hole in my sweatshirt.”

“Oh, Mrs. Cook, not the frizzle again?” said Mrs. Rivers reprovingly.

“I keep telling you people,” said Mrs. Cook, “I don’t like watching people frizzle up any more than most. I’m just deterring burglars. I ought to get paid extra.”

“Come, you like to see them frizzle up a *bit*, admit it,” said Uncle Henry.

“Oh a *bit*, everyone likes to see people frizzle up a *bit*,” said Mrs. Cook defensively.

“I don’t see any holes in your sweatshirt now, young man,” said Mr. Rivers, craning his neck forward over his soup bowl to peer at Rupert.

“He’s wearing my sweatshirt, Father,” said Turgid. “Will everybody please leave him alone? Rupert, read your joke.”

“What did one reindeer say to the other?” read Rupert.

“We’ve already *had* that one!” called out Uncle Mof-fat accusingly.

“There’s always a few repeats, you know that,” said Uncle Henry. “Enough. We’re done with the crackers. Everyone eat your soup.”

And just like that everyone did. Rupert noticed they were now all wearing the paper crowns from their crackers, so he put his own crown on and began to eat as well. The soup was the most delicious thing Rupert had ever eaten. It was full of cream and potato and he knew not what else. He ate it in quick, quiet spoonfuls and finished before everyone else. He wished he could have more, but as soon as he was done Billington swept his bowl away.

While Rupert waited for the others to finish, he looked at his party favor. It was a small plastic-wrapped deck of cards.

“What am I supposed to do with this?” he whispered to Turgid, although he need not have whispered because now everyone was eating and talking and drinking wine (the adults) and Shirley Temples (the children) and the room was full of happy festive noise.

“I dunno,” said Turgid.

“Well, what are you doing with your favor? What *is* yours?”

“Hmmm, looks like a key chain,” said Turgid. “We usually keep them around with the general clutter and mess of Christmas and then I don’t know where they

disappear to. Get thrown out, I suspect. Nobody really wants the things they get in the Christmas crackers. It's the same boring, worthless junk year to year. But, you know, you have to put up with it because, well, it's part of Christmas, isn't it? Doesn't your family do Christmas crackers?"

Rupert wanted to say, my family doesn't even do food, which wasn't quite true because of the Christmas turkey baskets. Although there was never enough chicken to go around, everyone got something from the basket. The rest of the food in the basket came from the food bank and it was mostly things people had found in their cupboards and regretted buying and so ended up putting in the food bank bins. It was heavy on the smoked octopus and chipotle-chickpeas kind of groceries, which, heaven knows, the Browns didn't object to. They were more than happy to eat Steelville's grocery mistakes.

"No, we've never done Christmas crackers," said Rupert.

If Turgid couldn't figure out that a person who couldn't afford winter boots or a coat probably couldn't afford Christmas crackers, Rupert wasn't going to appear unfriendly by pointing it out. Rupert wasn't even sure that Turgid had *noticed* his lack of boots and coat. He started to hide the small deck of cards under his bread plate when he realized that there was a roll sitting on it. He ate the roll and then saw the butter pat and he stuck

that whole into his mouth and let it melt in savory wonder all over his tongue. He'd never had butter. The only kind of fat the Browns ever saw was lard. He liked lard but the butter was simply out of this world. And all the time he was thinking that if the Riverses were throwing out the party favors perhaps it would be okay if he kept his. In fact, maybe he could somehow scoop up all the party favors before they got thrown out and take them home. He had never had a toy before and neither had his brothers or sisters. So he slowly palmed the cards and slid his hand to the edge of the table and then down to his side. He put the cards in the pocket of Turgid's sweat-pants, to be transferred later to his own pants.

When he looked up from this covert operation he found Uncle Henry eyeing him thoughtfully. Rupert blushed. He blushed until he thought he must be the color of an eggplant. He blushed until he thought he would explode. He quickly looked at his plate, but when he finally lifted his eyes again he saw that Uncle Henry had wiped the thoughtful expression off his face. He winked at Rupert and turned to talk to Sippy.

Being caught out was terrible. He was sure he had just done what they all expected a poor boy from the wrong side of town to do and he was filled with embarrassed regret, but at that moment the rest of the soup bowls were carried out of the room and Mrs. Cook began to bring in such a variety of tureens and platters that Rupert's

embarrassment was supplanted by excitement. He had never seen or smelled such food in his life. It would have been an extraordinary dinner for someone who ate well, but for someone living on thin oatmeal and kitchen scraps, it was a sight not to be believed. There was roast beef and mashed potatoes and roasted potatoes and Yorkshire pudding and gravy and biscuits and carrots and corn and beans and stuffing. There was cranberry sauce and cloudberry jelly and sour pickles and sweet pickles and hot pickles and chocolate pickles. There was cheese soufflé and spinach soufflé and spoonbread. There were so many kinds of food, so much food, and it began to be passed around the table at such speed that before he knew it, Rupert had a meal mountain before him on his plate.

He sat silently through the rest of dinner, eating away with intense concentration, feeling like a bear about to go into hibernation. He must put on all the weight he needed for winter. This is for January, he thought, taking more potatoes. This is for February, he thought, loading his plate up again with prime rib and pouring gravy on top.

By now he was feeling a little unwell, but just as he finished his last bite his plate was taken away and the pies were brought in: mince and apple and pumpkin and cherry and chocolate and banana. There were cookies and custards, éclairs and cake. There was pudding. There was fruit. There was cheese.