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pigeons flew out of the alley in one long swoop and settled on the awning of the grocery store. A dog ran out of the alley with a torn Cracker Jack box in his mouth. Then came the boy.

The boy was running hard and fast. He stopped at the sidewalk, looked both ways, saw that the street was deserted and kept going. The dog caught the boy's fear, and he started running with him.

The two of them ran together for a block. The dog's legs were so short he appeared to be on wheels. His Cracker Jack box was hitting the sidewalk. He kept glancing at the boy because he didn't know why they were running. The boy knew. He did not even notice the dog beside him or the trail of spilled Cracker Jacks behind.

Suddenly the boy slowed down, went up some stairs and entered an apartment building. The dog

stopped. He sensed that the danger had passed, but he stood for a moment at the bottom of the stairs. Then he went back to eat the Cracker Jacks scattered on the sidewalk and to snarl at the pigeons who had flown down to get some.

Inside the building the boy was still running. He went up the stairs three at a time, stumbled, pulled himself up by the banister and kept going until he was safely inside his own apartment. Then he sagged against the door.

His mother was sitting on the sofa, going over some papers. The boy waited for her to look up and ask him what had happened. He thought she should be able to hear something was wrong just from the terrible way he was breathing. "Mom," he said.

"Just a minute. I've got to get these orders straight." When she went over her cosmetic orders she had a dedicated, scientific look. He waited until she came to the end of the sheet.

"Mom." Without looking up, she turned to the next page. He said again, "*Mom.*"

"I'm almost through. There's a mistake some—"

He said, "Never mind." He walked heavily through the living room and into the hall. He threw himself down on the day bed.

His mother said, "I'm almost through with this, Benjie."

"I said, 'Never mind.'" He looked up at the ceiling. In a blur he saw a long cobweb hanging by

the light fixture. A month ago he had climbed on a chair, written UNSAFE FOR PUBLIC SWINGING and drawn an arrow to the cobweb. It was still there.

He closed his eyes. He was breathing so hard his throat hurt.

"Benjie, come back," his mother called. "I'm through."

"Never *mind.*"

"Come on, Benjie, I want to talk to you."

He got up slowly and walked into the living room. She had put her order books on the coffee table. "Sit down. Tell me what's wrong." He hesitated and then sat beside her on the sofa. She waited and then said again, "What's wrong?"

He did not answer for a moment. He looked out of the window, and he could see the apartment across the street. A yellow cat was sitting in the window watching the pigeons. He said in a low voice, "Some boys are going to kill me."

"Not *kill* you, Benjie," she said. "No one is—"

He glanced quickly at her. "Well, how do I know what they're going to do?" he said, suddenly angry. "They're chasing me, that's all I know. When you see somebody chasing you, and when it's Marv Hammerman and Tony Lionni and a boy in a black sweat shirt you don't stop and say, 'Now, what *exactly* are you guys planning to do—kill me or just break a few arms and legs?' "

"What did you do to these boys?"

"What did *I* do? I didn't do anything. You think I would do something to Marv Hammerman who is the biggest boy in my school? He is bigger than the eighth graders. He should be in high school."

"I know you did something. I can always tell. Now, what happened?"

"Nothing, Mom. I didn't do anything." He looked down at his shoes. With his foot he began to kick at the rug. A little mound of red lint piled up in front of his tennis shoe.

"They wouldn't be after you for nothing."

"Well, they are." He paused. He knew he had to give an explanation, but he could not give the right one. He said, "Maybe Hammerman just doesn't like me. I don't know. I'm not a mind reader."

"Look at me, Benjie."

Without looking up he said, "Mom, just listen to what Hammerman did to this boy in my room one time. This boy was in line in the cafeteria and Hammerman came up to him and—"

"What I want to hear is what happened *today*, Benjie."

"Just *listen*. And this boy in the cafeteria was standing in line, Mom, doing absolutely nothing, and Hammerman comes up to him and—"

"Benjie, what happened *today*?"

He hesitated. He looked down at his tennis shoe. There was a frayed hole in the toe, and he had taken a ballpoint pen and written AIR VENT and drawn a little arrow pointing to the hole.

"What happened?" she asked again.

"Nothing." He did not look at her.

"Benjie—"

"Nothing happened."

She sighed, then abruptly she looked up. "The beans!" She walked to the kitchen, and he lay back on the sofa and closed his eyes.

"Benjie?" He looked up. His mother was leaning around the door, looking at him. "Why don't you watch television? Get your mind off yourself. That always helps me."

"No, it won't help."

"Well, let's just see what's on." She came back in, turned on the television and waited for the set to warm up. He closed his eyes. He knew there was nothing on television that could interest him.

"Tarzan!" his mother said. "You always have loved Tarzan."

He opened his eyes and glanced at the screen. In the depths of the jungle, a hunter had stumbled into quicksand, and Tarzan was swinging to the rescue.

"All the hunter has to do," he said with a disgusted sigh, "is lie down on the quicksand and not struggle and he won't sink."

"That wouldn't leave anything for Tarzan to do though, would it?" his mother said, smiling a little.

"Oh, I don't know." He closed his eyes and shifted on the sofa. After a minute he heard his mother go back into the kitchen. He opened his

eyes. On the screen the hunter was still struggling. Cheetah was beginning to turn nervous somersaults. Tarzan was getting closer.

Once he and his friend Ezzie had made a list of all the ways they knew to stay alive. Ezzie had claimed he could stay alive in the jungle forever. Ezzie said every jungle emergency had a simple solution.

Lying on the sofa, he tried to remember some of those old emergencies.

A second one came into his mind. Emergency Two—Attack by an Unfriendly Lion. Lion attack, Ezzie claimed, was an everyday occurrence in the jungle. What you had to do to survive was wait until the last moment, until the lion was upon you, and then you had to ram your arm all the way down the lion's throat. This would choke him and make him helpless. It was bound to be a little unpleasant, Ezzie admitted, to be up to your shoulder in lion, but that couldn't be helped.

"Is the Tarzan movie any good?" his mother asked from the kitchen.

"No." He reached out with his foot and turned off the television. He sighed. Nothing could take his mind off Marv Hammerman for long.

"If it makes you feel any better," his mother said, "Teddy Roosevelt had the same problem. I saw it on television. Boys used to pick on him and chase him."

"No, it doesn't," he said. He waited a minute and

then asked, "What did Teddy Roosevelt do about it?"

"Well, as I remember it, Teddy's father got him a gymnasium and Teddy exercised and got strong and nobody ever picked on him again."

"Oh."

"Of course, it wasn't the same as—"

"Don't bother getting me a gymnasium."

"Now, Benjie, I didn't—"

"Unless you know of some exerciser that gives instant muscles." He thought about it for a minute. He would go out, exerciser in his pocket, and say, "Here I am, Hammerman." Then, just when Hammerman was stepping toward him, he would whip out the exerciser, pump it once, and muscles would pop out all over his body like balloons.

"Well, you'll handle it," his mother said. "In a few weeks you'll look back on this and laugh."

"Sure."

He lay with his eyes closed, trying to remember some more of the old ways he and Ezzie knew to survive life's greatest emergencies.

Emergency Three—Unexpected Charge of an Enraged Bull. Bulls have a blind spot in the centre of their vision, so when being charged by a bull, you try to line yourself up with this blind spot.

"Fat people can't do it, Mouse," Ezzie had told him. "That's why you never see any fat bullfighters. You and I can. We just turn sideways like this, see, get in the blind spot and wait."

He could remember exactly how Ezzie had looked, waiting sideways in the blind spot of the imaginary bull. "And there's one other thing," Ezzie had added. "It will probably work for a rhinoceros too."

Emergency Four—Crocodile Attack. When attacked by a crocodile, prop a stick in its mouth and the crocodile is helpless.

At one time this had been his own favourite emergency. He had spent a lot of time dreaming of tricking crocodiles. He had imagined himself a tornado in the water, handing out the sticks like party favours. "Take that and that and that!" The stunned crocodiles, mouths propped open, had dragged themselves away. For the rest of their lives they had avoided children with sticks in their hands. "Hey, no!" his dream crocodiles had cried, "Let that kid alone. He's got sticks, man, *sticks!*"

Abruptly he turned his head toward the sofa. The smile which had come to his face when he had remembered the crocodiles now faded. He pulled a thread in the slip cover. The material began to pucker, and he stopped pulling and smoothed it out. Then he took a pencil from his pocket and wrote in tiny letters on the wall PULL THREAD IN CASE OF BOREDOM and drew a little arrow to the sofa.

The words blurred suddenly, and he let the pencil drop behind the sofa. He lay back down. Hammerman was in his mind again, and he closed his eyes.

He tried hard to think of the days when he and Ezzie had been ready to handle crocodiles and bulls, quicksand and lions. It seemed a long time ago.