



REBECCA STEAD

THE EXPERIMENT



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To Faye,
just in case

PART ONE

ORDERS

LIFTOFF MINUS EIGHT DAYS

1
NATHAN

Nathan had spent the morning re-reading comics in bed before sliding into a long nap that ended when his dad tapped twice on the door and called out, "Are you conscious?"

It was how his dad always woke Nathan on school days (regular ones, when their world *wasn't* ending): two taps and "Are you conscious?"

Nathan usually answered, "I am now!"

Today he said, "Unfortunately."

He heard the key turn in the lock, and then his dad was smiling awkwardly in the doorway while balancing a tray in one hand.

"I brought lunch." He grinned at the books that still surrounded Nathan on the bed. "Bingeing some comics, huh? Life always seems a little brighter with *Calvin and Hobbes*."

Nathan wasn't a big reader, but his dad was right: *Calvin and Hobbes* was his safe space. His happy place. Not that he was feeling very happy—or safe—at the moment.

Sitting up, Nathan rubbed one eye. "It's lunchtime already? When are they getting here? I could have gone to school." Victor

was probably freaking out at school. Nathan was never absent. Never.

"Sorry, kiddo." His dad put down the lunch tray on Nathan's desk, exactly where Nathan's computer should have been sitting. "Hang tight. I'm sure it won't be much longer."

Nathan's best friend, Victor, loved *Calvin and Hobbes*, too. Sometimes they read the comic strips together out loud, each of them taking a character. Victor was always Calvin (the mischievous boy), and Nathan was always Hobbes (the thoughtful tiger).

Which made sense. Victor said Nathan was a lot like Hobbes because he was thoughtful and easygoing ("immune to annoying people," he said). And Victor was like Calvin because he was hyper and adventurous.

When Nathan said he was adventurous, too, Victor just smiled at him.

Nathan was pretty much dying to text Victor, but his parents had also taken his phone. He ate the lunch his dad brought him, even though he thought about not eating it. He could have pushed it away and said, "Zero calories! Tell her to write *that* down in the big book of everything."

But he didn't. He ate the whole thing: cheese and lettuce sandwich with pickles, a cup of blueberries (carefully weighed, he was sure, even today), a small bag of pretzels that he recognized from the plane (two ounces, conveniently labeled), and two Girl Scout cookies (oatmeal, which was all they had left). Plus two glasses of water, sitting side by side.

"Good job, mate," his dad said when he came back for the dishes. They both knew it was easier for Nathan's mom if he ate everything, because otherwise she'd have to weigh his leftovers and do the math. "Calorie intake" was one of the blanks on her daily report.

Nathan said he had to pee. "You still have to let me go to the *bathroom*, right?"

His dad looked shocked. "Of course. This is not your fault, kiddo. No one is mad at you." He let Nathan's door swing all the way open. "Your mom and I are . . ."

Sad? Disappointed? Freaked out? Hanging tight?

"Just following orders," Nathan said. "I know. Mom already told me."

In the bathroom, Nathan stared hard at himself. The Florida sun had brought out his freckles in the five days they'd been away for their (first-ever) family vacation. But nothing else seemed different. He didn't *look* like a failure.

In the mirror over the sink, anyway.

When Nathan was done, his dad locked him back in his room. "Remember," he called through the door, "we're a team!"

Nathan had been raised to believe that. He *wanted* to believe it. Lying across the bed (on his stomach), he watched a sliver of sunlight crawl a few inches across the floor and wished he were at school.

2
NO SCHOOL TODAY

Nathan's backpack, stuffed with his notebooks plus one smelly chunk of French cheese, was still on his desk chair, where he had set it down early that morning to pull on a sweatshirt before school. That was when the phone in his parents' bedroom rang. His mom had come into Nathan's room thirty seconds later, looking pale but trying to smile.

"No school today, honey. We're all going to the Wagon."

"The Wagon?" Nathan had felt like his heart might actually stop.

"Hester wants to see you, sweetheart."

"*Hester called?* Wait. Do we have to?"

She blinked. "She's the boss, sweetie."

"Can't I just go to a doctor or something? Here? In New York?"

She glanced around the room, and Nathan followed her gaze to the papier-mâché mask hanging on the wall above his desk. He'd made it in third grade, when he and Victor both had Mr. Edmund, the best art teacher at school. Mr. Edmund always let them hang out in the art room during lunch.

Nathan's heart had changed its mind: Instead of stopping, it was going double-time. "Mom?"

Now she was staring out the window, where Nathan saw pigeons flying in a big circle over the water tower across the street. Around and around.

"Someone's coming to pick us up," she said. And then she left, closing the door behind her.

That was when he heard the key turn in his door.

"You locked me *in*?" he yelled.

She answered through the door, "Just a precaution, sweetie. Hester's orders. I love you. Try not to worry."

3
THE TRUTH

After eating one hundred percent of his lunch, Nathan discovered that the crack under his bedroom door allowed him a pretty decent view of the apartment. He spent the next hours with one cheek to the floor, looking through the kitchen, past the crowded shoe rack by the front door, and straight into the living room. Waiting.

Waiting for the doorbell to ring.

Waiting for his parents to emerge from their room.

Waiting for this endless day to be over.

But also: not wanting it to end. Because what came next might be worse.

All afternoon, Toto paced up and down the kitchen cupboards like a guard, whiskers twitching. Once, cupping his hands together, Nathan called to him through the crack, and Toto trotted to the other side of his door. Nathan poked a finger underneath to touch Toto's paw. They stayed like that for a minute.

"Your cat is extra-smart, right?" Victor had asked him a long time ago. "I never had one because my grandma's allergic, but

I'm pretty sure most cats aren't that smart." (Nathan had just asked Toto to give them "some privacy," and Toto had raised his tail, sneezed once, and left the room.)

"He's enhanced," Nathan had explained.

Victor had laughed. But Nathan was telling the truth.

Nathan wasn't a big fan of secrets. He thought anyone who "loved secrets" probably never had to keep a really big one.

When a girl in his fourth-grade class asked Nathan why he brushed his teeth at school, Nathan said that his parents made him do it. Which was absolutely true.

"Yeah, but why?" she said.

"Because they're aliens," he told her. She had laughed, too.

What Nathan felt in those moments was a secret thrill: half fear, half excitement. Plus maybe an unspoken wish to be seen as the person he really was?

But Nathan's whole job was *not* to be seen as who he was. To be "undetectable."

He'd really messed that up. Because someone with a tail, even a really small one, was never going to pass for human.

Now his tiny bedroom-behind-the-kitchen was getting dimmer by the minute. Nathan was *glad* his room was going gray, because he was tired of looking at everything in it, especially the blank space on his desk where his computer should have been sitting and the dangling cord that should have been charging his phone.

He got off the floor and squinted at the clock: It was almost four. How long could French cheese stay out of the refrigerator before it went bad?

He hoped his backpack wasn't going to smell weird after this.

Glancing once at the door, he went to the papier-mâché mask hanging on the wall. It was an orange, white, and black tiger face: in other words, a Hobbes mask. (Victor, of course, had made a Calvin mask.)

Carefully, Nathan lifted the mask from its nail with one hand, using the other hand to catch the small flip phone that was hidden behind it.

4
HI

Nathan turned on the flip phone, listening to the sound of his own breathing as he waited for it to power up. He *should* have been having a normal day at school with Victor: Mr. Takagi telling dumb riddles in homeroom, the Monday math quiz in pre-algebra, and playing jackpot at recess. And today was Foods of France Day in World Languages for all the sixth graders. Everyone was bringing in things like croissants, baguettes, and something called pâté. Ms. DuBois had been talking about it for a month.

Now Nathan would probably never taste pâté, whatever that was.

And he might never see Victor again.

He pulled up his texts. There was only one long text thread on this phone. He scanned it for new messages, knowing there wouldn't be any. (There weren't.)

Slowly, he keyed in Victor's number. Victor wouldn't recognize this phone number, but he would know the message was from Nathan.

Dear Calvin, he wrote, *something happened.*

Nathan hesitated, then continued:

I might not see you again. You're a really good friend. The best, actually.

Will miss you.

From Hobbes

Nathan sent the text. "P.S.," he said out loud to no one. "Help."

5
NINE GOOD FRIENDS

Nathan's mom always said he grew up with "nine good friends." She meant the "friends" from the virtual meets: Chris from California, Miriam from Missouri, Nina from New Mexico, Annie from Alabama, Leo from Louisiana, and the rest. Every one of them was an alien, just like Nathan.

Kast, they were called. (Their planet was also called Kast.)

But the once-a-month virtual meets were awkward, with all the parents standing behind their kids' chairs with their faces out of view, acting like suspicious wallpaper. A big part of becoming friends with someone was just hanging out with nobody watching. Which is impossible to do when you know the grown-ups are literally taking notes.

Isabel from Illinois was the only one of his "nine good friends" that Nathan had ever met in real life, and that was only once, for twenty minutes, at a gas station.

With Izzy, once, for twenty minutes, at a gas station, meant a lot.

Nathan sat down (gently) on the bed and scrolled back through the long string of his unanswered texts to Izzy. He scrolled all

the way back to the last text Izzy had sent *him*, almost a month ago now.

Her last three words to him were *I think so*.

After that, Izzy disappeared.

Just like Nathan might be about to disappear.

The phone in his hand lit up, making Nathan's heart jump. Victor had texted him back. *Nathan???? Where RU??*

Oops. He hadn't thought this through. He'd meant his note to be a kind of goodbye, in case he wasn't coming back. But he couldn't *explain*. He wasn't allowed!

Another text showed up: *Dude what is happening right now? You sound bad*.

Nathan slapped the phone closed. And powered it down.

6
THE WAGON

Nathan squeezed the phone in his hand. Texting had been a dumb idea. He owed Victor more than a mysterious goodbye. He wanted to leave him an actual explanation. Something Victor could find after they'd gone.

If they were really leaving, it wouldn't matter if Nathan told Victor the truth, right?

But he couldn't leave a letter out with Victor's name on it. Something like that would be spotted right away.

Nathan scanned the room, his eyes landing on the *Calvin and Hobbes* poster over his bed. Perfect. He pulled out the four blue thumbtacks, carefully tucking them one by one into his front jeans pocket.

Laying the poster upside down on his desk, he reached for a pen.

Dear Victor,
You signed up to bring in those little French pickles Ms. DuBois told us about, but I'm pretty sure you forgot to bring them in.

You usually forget. No offense. I was actually about to text you to remember when our phone rang this morning. Then my mom came into my room and asked to "see my phone for a second."

Goodbye phone.

Goodbye computer.

Goodbye New York.

Goodbye world.

This is awkward.

Most people don't really know how big Earth is, compared to its moon. (We all call it THE moon, but there are millions of moons out there, people!) My dad laid it all out for me when I was really little.

It's easy:

1. Pretend you have a big ball of Play-Doh.
2. Now, in your head, divide that big ball into fifty small Play-Doh balls, all the same size.
3. Pick up one of those fifty balls and set it aside.
4. Now take the other forty-nine balls and smush them back together into one big ball.
5. Hold the big ball in one hand and the small ball in the other. That's pretty much Earth and its moon.

Dad and I actually did this, with real Play-Doh, once. I remember Mom telling me how it was a <u>big secret</u>, just for our family.

And I was pretty confused. I was thinking, "Play-Doh is a

secret? The moon is a secret?" I didn't get it. She meant this next part:

Now look at the little moon-ball in your hand and imagine it breaking into a hundred thousand pieces. Pick up one of those, and you're holding our ship. Also known as the Wagon.

That's where my parents grew up, on their way to this planet.

They came from somewhere a lot farther away than the moon. A planet called Kast.

But I was born here. I'm just like you. Or I <u>was</u> just like you. When we were in Florida for vacation last week, something happened to me. Mom and Dad had to report it, and now we're all going to the Wagon. Today.

I wish I knew if we were coming back.

I hope you find this. I think.

Love, Nathan