

“The Most Boring Family In The World”

It had been too long without someone to play with. Young Peter Jefferies used to play hockey. He used to ride his bike. He used to gather with Fred and Tom on *their* bikes and hunt doorbells and pedal like mad when they were finally answered. What he wouldn't give to have even one of those angry owners scream in his face. But no. Peter Jefferies and the rest of the world were trapped inside while the virus raged on. This meant no friends at Peter's house and no Peter at Fred or Tom's homes until someone said it was okay. He wanted it to be okay. He wanted to see another face beside his mother's or his father's or his sister Suzy's or his Grandmother's, none of whom were much fun at all and when Peter thought about it, he was sure they might be the most boring people on earth.

“Absolutely not,” his father said when Peter had asked for just *five* minutes with just one friend, any friend at all. His mother said the same and his Grandmother only grunted at him while she knitted a sweater in the corner.

Peter was so desperate for company that he asked Suzy to play with him, but she wasn't interested so here Peter was, staring out the window at an empty street. He popped gum in his mouth, then outside his mouth, then high onto his nose, and finally went for the window. It stuck well. “Peter!” his mother yelled, throwing her dish towel onto the counter, scrambling beneath the sink for something to clean the window with. “Go outside and get some sun! Anything, please, just go outside.” He went.

But a boy could only go so far when it wasn't yet okay to travel. He tossed sticks around his backyard, plucked grass, sat and watched a beetle crawl over his fingers. Then the click of the back gate stirring in the wind called to Peter like the ring of a bicycle bell. He stood, going to the

gate as one would an airport, where new things waited for you at the end of your travels. Peter released the catch and pulled the gate open, emerging into the forest behind like a new deer on an African veldt. Big trees were bigger here. Birds wilder. The thrill of unfamiliarity surged through him and suddenly Peter was running, running and going far, farther, up, over, through, down and into every part of the living forest. A boy could breathe here! He could turn and free himself on logs and high up on tree limbs and in black burrows and on the rocky shores of the silver stream that wound through and beyond to other enchantments. Peter was just about to race a fallen leaf downstream when his mother called. "Peter! Peter Cameron Jefferies you get back here! Right this minute, mister! Right NOW." She bellowed so that Peter could hear the thunder in her voice cracking through the trees.

He sighed like a boy who had almost rung a bell but didn't quite get to the door, then he picked his way through the forest toward his backyard when something cried out at him. Peter froze. The thing howled, whining and shuffling beneath a pile of leaves. His mother's thunder hailed him, threatening something much worse than isolation but then the leaves parted and the grey head of a kitten mewled at him. He picked it up and ran.

"No way," his mother said when he held the small thing to her face. She wrinkled her nose at the animal but when Peter pressed, she said, "Go ask your father."

Busy fathers on virtual computer meetings pleased their children even when they didn't know they were pleasing them, they were only vaguely aware that they were being called upon to settle something for which their wives were reluctant or unwilling to answer. During these meetings, their answers were almost always yes, so this is when Peter asked his father about the cat.

Peter named him Fred. The kitten was fun but it slept a lot and Peter soon found he got bored with it and thought that maybe it would be a good idea to search the forest for another pet.

He found a rabbit.

His father said yes.

Then Peter found a lizard and an abandoned nest of baby sparrows.

His father said yes.

Then Peter found a duck and two more kittens and even a chipmunk.

His mother stopped her cleaning and his grandmother stopped her knitting and even Suzy stopped adding glitter to her crafts and they all said, “No more pets, Peter.”

But Peter couldn't go out and he didn't want to stay inside with the most boring family in the world so he went back to the forest and collected a colony of ants and an infant fox and ten fish in buckets. By the time Peter's father had finished his computer meetings, there were snakes in the vents, spiders in the sockets, turtles in pillowcases, nests in the attic, minnows in the toilets, geese in the kitchen, and a cow in the living room. “But what's all this?” his father asked, having not noticed the strange looks his coworkers gave him when they looked at him and his house from their own computer screens.

“Company!” Peter cried delightedly.

“A mess!” his mother cried, cleaning goose poop off the stove.

“Destruction!” Grandma cried, tearing her yarn away from the kittens.

“Gross!” Suzy gagged, flicking spiders away from her dolls.

Peter's father looked around and saw for the first time in many months that his family was busy and energized and surrounded by other living, breathing creatures. He did not shout at Peter, nor did he shoo the animals outside. Instead, he looked at the smile on his boy's face and

at the renewed vigor of his family. Then he put on his shoes and joined Peter in the forest outside to find a bear.