

Fifteen Years Later

by Diana Smith/Pat Dunn

"MacKensie!"

Recognizing both the tone and the voice, Jonathan MacKensie sighed and abandoned the term paper he'd been trying to grade. Removing his glasses, he pinched the bridge of his nose and squeezed his eyes shut. The door to his office opened and he said, "Yes, Dr. Moorhouse? What have they done now?" He opened his eyes to find Julianna Moorhouse with two small boys, one of either side of her, hands firmly grasped by hers.

The boys were covered with dust and dirt, and a musty odor clung to the pair. Both managed sheepish grins as they met their father's gaze.

"They were in my storeroom again," Moorhouse announced, holding grubby hands out toward Jonathan.

"Boys, I thought we had already dis-cussed this." Jonathan stood up and came around his desk where he leaned against its front and folded his arms across his chest.

The older of the two shrugged his shoulders and looked at Jonathan with guileless eyes. "We wanted to see the mummy--"

"See it? They dismantled it!"

One of Jonathan's hands crept up to massage between his eyes. "Dismantled?"

"Unwrapped every scrap of linen," Moorhouse assured him with a rather sadistic pleasure.

"Uncle Benny said it was E.T.'s grandpa," the younger boy piped up.

"I knew it! Benedek's influence!"

Jonathan held up a hand to still his superior's tirade. "Jem, Malcolm," he said with a calmness he didn't feel. "You know the storeroom is off-limits, no matter what story Uncle Benny tells you."

"But, Da--"

"Jem, you're the oldest and should show some sense of responsibility," Jonathan continued, ignoring his son's protest.

"I'm just a little kid!"

Jonathan frowned at the ten-year-old. Maybe it had been a mistake to let Benedek babysit the kids, even if the only other choice was to cancel the twelfth anniversary celebration Caitlyn had planned for them.

"Sides, it was Mal's idea."

"Malcolm?"

The eight-year-old dug the toe of a ragged neon-green sneaker into the carpet. "It was just old bones and dirt," he mumbled.

"But it didn't belong to you, did it?"

"No, sir," Malcolm whispered.

"Jem?"

"She ain't using it."

"Isn't," Jonathan corrected automatically.

"And that's not the point. Those artifacts belong to the Institute, and are **not** for little boys to use as playthings."

"Sorry," Malcolm mumbled, peeking up at Dr. Moorhouse.

"I don't think an apology is enough this time," Jonathan said, wondering what spirits he must have angered to warrant two sons more like his wife's cousin than himself. It had to be the Benedek genes. "Dr. Moorhouse will extract her pound of flesh with my full support."

Malcolm's brown eyes widened, and he darted another look at Dr. Moorhouse before apprehensively lowering his head and studying the carpet.

But Jem's expression became mutinous. "Dad, that's not--"

"Jonathan Edgar MacKensie!"

The elder boy fell silent as his father moved a step in his direction. "I don't want to hear that's it's not fair or not your fault, Jem. You know our rules, and you certainly should know the difference between right and wrong by now. If you don't, then maybe a punishment will help you remember."

Jem ducked his head. "Yessir. Sorry, Dr. M."

Julianna's eyes widened behind her magnifying glasses and she shuddered. "I think someone just walked over my grave," she murmured.

"Well, he didn't learn that from **me**," Jonathan was quick to assure her. "Or Caitlyn."

"I'm not sure Georgetown Institute will survive the MacKensie boys," she said with a heavy sigh.

"Well, it would help if we could keep rooms like your storeroom locked--"

"I've kept that room locked since the first time they got in there," Moorhouse said huffily. "I have the only key."

"Somehow they got hold of it," Jonathan began, thinking that perhaps she was getting forgetful in her old age, but he was too much the gentleman to voice it. "Or maybe--not," he continued thoughtfully as he observed the look that passed between his sons. "Hand it over."

Malcolm looked at his father's out-stretched hand and then at Jem.

"Now, Jem," Jonathan continued, turning his attention to his eldest. This child alone was probably responsible for the gray hair silvering his father's temples. Malcolm followed his big brother's lead, and fortunately, Katie Rose was a sunny-natured, obedient child. Ah, but Jem--Jem was the rebel, headstrong and determined to follow his own path.

"I haven't got it, Dad," Jem said.

"He gave it to Katie Rose," Malcolm added helpfully.

"What? You've gone **too** far now, boys. Why you would want to get your little sister involved in your mischief is beyond me..."

"It was **her** hairpin," Malcolm said.

Jem nodded. "I picked the lock with it, just like Uncle Benny showed me. But Katie Rose made so much noise, I had to give it back to her afterward."

Jonathan rubbed a hand over his face, mentally counted to twenty--in Latin--and then took a deep breath. "Where is your sister?" he asked slowly, enunciating each word. His head swung around when Moorhouse answered.

"With Liz. The poor little angel was filthy and in tears--"

"Liz?" Jonathan repeated stupidly.

"Katie Rose, Jonathan," she corrected sternly.

"Oh." He considered for a moment, then sighed. "I'm sure I was never this much trouble for **my** father," he muttered, running a hand through his hair.

"Da!"

He looked up and broke into a smile as his daughter ran into the office, her arms stretched up in invitation. Bending down, Jonathan swept the three-year-old up and held her close. A miniature of her mother, Katie Rose had him wrapped around her little finger.

Mother. Jonathan frowned and absently patted his daughter's strawberry blonde curls as she chattered at him about those 'bad boys.' "Where **is** your mother?" he asked, looking at his sons.

Jem and Malcolm exchanged glances. "She had a meeting," Malcolm finally said.

"A meeting? What kind of meeting? Where? **Here?** With whom? And why did she leave you three on your own?"

Malcolm hung his head, leaving his brother to deal with their father's questions.

"We were supposed to wait in the outer office," Jem admitted reluctantly. "We got tired of waiting, and Katie Rose started to fidget."

"And so you decided to trash the storeroom?"

"Relaxavision, Dad--"

"**What?!**"

"I mean we didn't trash the **whole** place. Just the mummy--"

"**Just** the mummy?"

"Well, you said yourself that it wasn't that important or valuable, and that the Institute had acquired it back in the days when mummies were a dime a dozen and people used to use them for kindling..."

"Jem!" Jonathan exclaimed, horrified.

"MacKensie!" said Moorhouse, her expression darkening. "**Did** you say those things?"

"Well, uh, I **may** have, but it certainly doesn't justify vandalism!"

Katie Rose chose that moment to burst into tears, sobbing as if her heart had broken. Moorhouse, Jem and Malcolm began arguing simultaneously and as their voices rose, so did the toddler's wails. Jonathan frantically patted his daughter's back, trying to comfort her, while at the same time trying to defend himself from Moorhouse and chastise his sons. To add to the confusion, Liz came in and tried to take the little girl from Jonathan's arms. This only served to increase the volume of Katie Rose's screams and she wrapped her arms around her father's neck, clinging like a baby monkey.

"What **is** going on in here?"

The mayhem froze, suspended in time for a brief moment at Caitlyn MacKensie's entrance.

"Mama!" Katie Rose shrieked, reaching out for her mother. Jonathan gladly handed her over, freeing his hands to grab the collars of his sons' shirts as the boys started for the door.

One look at the guilty faces and Caitlyn sighed. "Something tells me they did more than sneak out of the Chancellor's waiting room," she said, soothing her daughter as she looked at Jonathan.

"Katie Rose got bored--"

"It was Jem's idea--"

"They destroyed my mummy!"

"Mummy?" Caitlyn repeated weakly, exchanging glances with Jonathan. "Jem, Malcolm-- how could you?"

"Apparently by breaking and entering," said Moorhouse.

"Oh, dear." With a mother's presence of mind, she said, "Then they'll just have to help clean up the mess they made." She studied their clothes and shook her head. "But not in those clothes. Let me take them home and get them changed, Julianna, and then I'll bring them back, ready to work."

Dr. Moorhouse studied the two dirty, mutinous faces. "Work...yes, I do think I can find suitable work for them around here." Jonathan was glad her smile was **not** directed at him for a change. It was the dangerous smile he'd come to know and fear.

"And I think someone is ready for a nap," Caitlyn continued, Katie Rose's head on her shoulder.

"Yes, I think a nap is an excellent idea," Jonathan began, a gleam in his eyes.

Caitlyn shook her head. "I meant Katie Rose," she corrected softly. "**You** get to supervise the work crew."

"Me?" Jonathan yelped in protest. "I had nothing to do--"

"I should have left them with you in the first place, but I didn't want to bother you. I couldn't get a sitter on such short notice," Caitlyn said in self-defense. "The Chancellor wanted to see me and I barely had time to get everyone cleaned up before my appointment."

"The Chancellor interviewed...**you**?"

"Standard procedure, Jonathan," Moorhouse interjected. "You know that."

"I do?"

"I understand it's just a formality, dear." Caitlyn smiled at his expression. "The Chancellor always meets with the spouses of his new department heads."

"Oh, well, yes he does, but what has that to do with...you? Department head?" Jonathan stared at Moorhouse.

"It's time to retire," Julianna said with an impish twinkle. "I have a book to write and some traveling to do. The Board asked for my recommendation and I gave it to them. Congratulations, MacKensie."

He opened his mouth, closed it, then grinned broadly. "Department Chair? Oh, well, I'm--**very** honored, Dr. Moorhouse! This is wonderful news. Thank you!"

"Hmm. You're welcome, Jonathan." She adjusted her glasses and added gruffly, "I'll expect to see these two rascalions later--at your convenience, of course." With a final glare at the two boys, she left the office.

Jem twisted around to look up at his father. "Congratulations, Dad. Can we have pizza to celebrate?"

"We'll save the celebration for **tomorrow** night," Jonathan replied. "Caitlyn, you'll have your hands full with these two, and I can't leave until four. Why don't you leave Katie Rose with me? She can

nap on the sofa and I'll watch her until you get back with the boys."

"We--ll, I suppose so." Caitlyn gave Jonathan a dubious look.

"You know she won't be any trouble," Jonathan persisted. "She's nearly out now and if she does wake up before you get back she can color." He nodded at the tiny table and two chairs sitting unobtrusively in the corner behind his desk. A shoebox of crayons, pad of paper and several coloring books sat in the middle of the table, ready for Jonathan's little visitors. Jem and Malcolm had spent their share of hours at that table and on occasion Malcolm would still use it, providing Jem wasn't around to torment him about it.

"I suppose it's the best plan," Caitlyn said, kissing the toddler's cheek as she handed her over into Jonathan's waiting arms. Katie Rose promptly snuggled against his chest, her head tucked under his chin. "Let's go," she said to the troublesome twosome. Jonathan bent his knees so he could exchange a quick kiss with Caitlyn without disturbing Katie Rose. "You will keep an eye on her, won't you?"

"How much trouble can she be? She's already asleep," Jonathan pointed out.

"I believe you asked a similar question once before," she said, nodding at Jem and Malcolm. "'How much trouble can they be?' you said. 'They can color.' Do you remember **what** they colored that day?"

Jonathan rubbed Katie Rose's back and looked a little guilty. "They were just looking at books," he said in self-defense.

"Yes, your National Geographic and Anthropology Today were perfect for a three and five year old, weren't they? It certainly didn't give them any ideas, did it?"

"Now, Caity," Jonathan protested, recalling that day as clearly as if it had been yesterday.

The boys were quietly occupied at the little table and Jonathan had decided to slip out to the outer office to confer with Liz. His jaw had dropped almost to the floor when Moorhouse brought in two naked little boys and handed them over to Jonathan with an icy, "Yours, I believe."

Jem and Malcolm had done a credible job of imitating the naked, tattooed natives in the magazines, using the markers from the crayon box. It was only later, when trying to remove the artwork that it was discovered he had neglected to purchase **washable** Crayola markers as Caitlyn had instructed.

"I promise I'll keep an eye on her," he swore and Caitlyn finally nodded, herding the boys out of the office.

He could still hear their voices in the outer office when he realized Katie Rose was already fast asleep. Chuckling to himself, he settled her on the sofa that had long ago replaced his old recliner. Ruffled bottom sticking in the air, Katie Rose slept on her stomach with her knees drawn under her and thumb in her mouth.

Tucking the afghan around her, Jonathan studied the sleeping child for a moment. Sighing, he returned to his desk and the long-forgotten term paper.

He tried, he really did, but his heart just wasn't in it. Sitting back in his desk chair, he stared at the framed wedding photo on his desk. Benedek, playing a dual role that day, beamed as he and Jonathan flanked the blushing bride. Not only had he been Jonathan's best man, but he'd also given the bride away.

Leaning forward, Jonathan picked up the photo. "I would never have believed I'd marry a relative of yours, old friend," he murmured, staring at Benny's image.

A knock on the door jerked him out of his reverie and he plunked the picture frame back in its spot among the pictures of his children.

For the next hour he was busy with students while his daughter slept blissfully on. Katie Rose had the ability to fall asleep quickly, sleep soundly and then wake up bright-eyed and cheerful.

At last there was a lull, and Jonathans sat back with a sigh. He loved teaching and his easy rapport with his students still made him one of the most popular professors on campus. He didn't begrudge the time they demanded, but there were moments when the domestic crises made it less enjoyable.

Today was one of those days. Jem and Malcolm were at the forefront of his mind. "I'm sure I never gave my father so much trouble."

"You had your moments."

Jonathan gave a start and turned to look behind him. A man stood silhouetted against the window. He stepped forward and Jonathan's mouth dropped open in recognition. "Fa-Father?"

"Hello, son," said Leonard MacKensie benevolently, smiling at him.

"You--you're really here?" Jonathan stammered, staring at--and **through**--his father's ghost. "You're not one of Benedek's pranks?"

"Not this time," the elder MacKensie said.

"You know about that?"

Leonard smiled at Jonathan's astonishment. "Death doesn't change a father's love and concern. In

fact, both your mother and I have kept watch over you--and your little brood."

"Mother? Is she here? I can't believe I'm having this conversation. It must be stress."

Jonathan rubbed his forehead.

"We thought it would be too much of a shock if we both popped in, but your mother sends her love," Leonard assured him. "She was quite pleased to have Kathleen Rose named after her, by the way."

"Caitlyn insisted."

"Lovely girl," said Leonard, looking at the photo on Jonathan's desk. "You've done very well: beautiful wife, fine children, outstanding career. We're very proud of you, son."

Jonathan swallowed hard and his eyes glittered with the touch of tears. "I thought I'd never hear that, Father," he said softly.

"Gran-da? A story for Katie Wose?"

Jonathan turned to see his daughter wide-awake, a brilliant smile of delight lighting her face as she looked at the ghost of Leonard MacKensie.

"Story--please?" Katie Rose persisted, slipping from the sofa and going to stand before her grandfather. "Pwincess Katie Wose, Gran-da?"

"She--she knows you!"

"She has much of her mother in her,"

Leonard said with a shrug, and Jonathan blanched. Caitlyn had become a useful part of the Paranormal Unit shortly after her psi powers had been enhanced by a lunatic scientist's experiments on her. Her ability to communicate with spirits, and flashes of precognition had helped convince Jonathan to open his mind and accept the paranormal possibilities.

"Are you saying Katie Rose is--psychic?"

"The boys to some degree, too, but it is very strong in the little one."

"Story, Gran-da!"

"Yes, all right," Leonard told his granddaughter. He glanced apologetically at Jonathan. "You don't mind, I hope? She does love to hear her stories."

"I--" Jonathan's voice failed him, and he waved a hand in permission. He watched with utter astonishment as his father sat on the sofa, the little girl beside him, and began to speak to her in a low voice.

Listening to the tale his father was spinning, Jonathan was drawn back in time. Bedtime had always been a special time, just the two of them sharing marvelous adventures. "Oh, Father," Jonathan whispered, thinking of the years taken from them by Leonard's fatal stroke.

The clatter of sneakered feet broke into the moment, and the door was flung open by the squabbling Jem and Malcolm.

"Boys," Caitlyn was saying in a warning tone as she followed the pair into Jonathan's office.

"Hey, it's Granddad!" Malcolm announced, pointing at the ghost sitting next to Katie Rose.

Jem came to a halt, staring at the older MacKensie.

"Come in, Jem," said Jonathan, remarkably calm under the circumstances. "Caitlyn, can you see him, too?"

She followed his gaze to the sofa. "Jonathan, who is that man?"

He sighed in utter resignation. "My father. He just--popped in--for a visit, it seems."

"Gran-da," Katie Rose said to her mother, pointing at the MacKensie specter. "Pwincess Katie Wose story again?"

"Again?" Caitlyn said faintly. "Does this mean--?"

"That he has been visiting the children regularly? Yes, he has," Jonathan answered cheerfully.

"Your mother, too," Leonard assured him. He smiled at Caitlyn. "It was a beautiful wedding."

"Thank you," Caitlyn said automatically. "Well, this is a surprise."

"You can say that again," Jonathan agreed.

She gave him a curious look. "Are you all right, Jonathan?"

"Sure, why shouldn't I be all right?" he asked.

"Well, you're not quite used to--even after fifteen years you still balk at this sort of thing." Caitlyn nabbed Jem by the arm as he tried to sidle past her and out the door.

"I'll have the nervous breakdown later," he assured her.

She sighed in relief. "Well, I'm glad you've finally met. I wasn't sure what to say after the first time I saw him, so I was waiting until he decided to let you see him before..." she trailed off as Jonathan closed his eyes and whimpered a little.

Leonard ignored this discussion. Shush-ing Katie Rose with the promise, "I'll tell it again when you go to bed, darling," he rose and approached the boys. "Hello, Malcolm."

"Hi, Granddad."

"Jem," the ghost added, "we need to talk."

"I know, it was wrong and disrespectful but I don't care! She--she made me mad," Jem said, dark eyes so like his father flashing. "She said I was too much like Uncle Benny and that it was a bad thing to be. I **like** Uncle Benny!" His hands fisted on his hips. "I don't have to be perfect like you and Dad. I want to

wear rad clothes and have lots of interesting friends. I **want** to be like Uncle Benny."

"Oh, Jem," Caitlyn murmured, bending down to kiss him. She hugged him close to her, ignoring his attempts to squirm away. "Benny would be so pleased to hear you say that."

Malcolm looked at them, then turned toward Jonathan. "I like you, Dad!"

"Thank you, Malcolm," said Jonathan, exchanging a glance with his father. "Jem, I'm not expecting you--or your brother and sister--to grow up to be **just** like me, or your mother... Benny has a lot of fine qualities you **should** emulate."

"Huh?" Jem looked surprised.

"He's loyal to his friends, very generous, he cares about other people, and he's sure enough of who he is to be a complete individual. Wouldn't you agree, Cait?"

"Absolutely." She smiled at her eldest son. "And besides, your father is far from perfect despite what Dr. Moorhouse says."

"Hey!"

"Well, it's true, professor," Caitlyn said, turning her smile in his direction. "Surely you haven't forgotten our honeymoon?"

"That wasn't entirely my fault--" he broke off at the look she gave him. "Well, the crutches didn't interfere all that much."

"You see, Jem, your father can be rather--clumsy at times. And sometimes he is rather short-tempered and a bit too quick to judge. Far from perfection, but that doesn't mean he isn't a good man. He's always a gentleman, and treats people with kindness. It would please me very much if you and Malcolm developed the same chivalry, but that doesn't mean you have to do everything else like your father. You certainly don't have to dress like him or become an anthropologist."

Jem and Malcolm exchanged glances.

"I'm gonna be an archeologist and dress like Indiana Jones," Malcolm announced. "Dad, can I have--"

"No, Malcolm, you may **not** have a bullwhip until you are older," Jonathan said wearily.

Jem folded his arms. "I'm gonna be a paranormal investigator," he said, his tone daring his parents to object.

"Fine," Jonathan shrugged. "Do you want a Ghostbuster suit or just the address to Benedek's tailor?"

Jem blinked. "You're really not mad?"

"I don't care what you become when you grow up, Jem, as long as you try to curb this

unfortunate tendency to break the law. I will **not** have a son who is a criminal."

"That sounds reasonable to me," Leonard spoke up.

"What about **her**?" Malcolm asked, pointing at Katie Rose who had wandered over to the little table and was rooting through the crayon box.

Jonathan smiled at his youngest. "Right now I'd settle for less crayon-eating."

"Oh!" Caitlyn let go of Jem and hurried over to pry the crayon from Katie Rose's hand.

Katie Rose beamed up at her mother and announced, "Uncle Benny!"

"Is she saying that he's responsible for--"

"Of course not," Caitlyn said, picking up the toddler. "I think she wants to color a picture for him, isn't that right, Sweetie?"

"Uncle Benny!"

"Hey, hey, MacKensies!" a cheerful voice called from the doorway. "How's it going?" Edgar Benedek opened his arms as Katie Rose trotted toward him.

"I thought you were still in Calcutta," Jonathan remarked.

"Got the interview with the swami sooner than I expected," Benedek said, grinning as he picked up Katie Rose. "Hiya, Sweetheart."

Jonathan gaped, then turned to Caitlyn. "She couldn't have seen him--how did she know--?"

Caitlyn smiled as she took his hand. "Are you sure you want an answer to that, darling?"

"Uh, maybe not."

"So, why the big pow-wow?" asked Benny, blowing noisy kisses against the toddler's neck and eliciting wild giggles. "Hey, Dr. Len! When are we gonna do the big interview? You know: NOBEL PRIZE WINNER SPEAKS FROM BEYOND. We could shake the socks off a few academic types."

"Have you visited everyone except me?" Jonathan muttered to his father's ghost.

"Uncle Benny! I get to be a paranormal investigator, just like you. Dad says I can," Jem interrupted, tugging on Benny's arm.

"I'm gonna be an archeologist, just like Indy," Malcolm announced, hanging onto Benny's other arm. "Dad says I can."

The boys pulled Benny to the floor where Katie Rose sat on his chest and shouted at her brothers.

"Dad said all that, huh? What about Katie Rosebud here? She's not gonna be another Dr. M is she?" Benny asked, tickling the little girl and looking up at Jonathan.

"Benedek, it's very difficult to teach my children the proper way to address adults when you're using those ridiculous nicknames in front of them."

"Huh?" Benny looked bewildered.

"Steady on, son," murmured Leonard.

Jonathan ran a hand through his hair. "Sorry. Things have been a bit hectic here. Dr. Moorhouse is up in arms because my sons destroyed the mummy in the storeroom." He struck a stern pose. "They have an appointment with a broom and dustpan--now!"

"Aw, Dad--"

"Uncle Benny just got here," Malcolm pointed out.

"That's certainly a good reason to ignore your responsibilities," Jonathan said. "As I recall, he's involved in this fiasco."

"I wasn't even here!"

"Who suggested that mummy might be an extra-terrestrial?"

"Ah, well, come on, Jack," Benny began in protest.

"In fact, I think it would be an excellent idea if **you** did your share of the clean-up," Jonathan continued, ignoring Benny's interruption.

Benny opened his mouth, then looked down as his adopted nephews began a chorus of assent.

"Please, Uncle Benny!"

"Come on, we'll have fun!"

Jonathan frowned. 'Fun' wasn't what he had intended by this suggestion, but it was too late to take it back now.

Benny grinned as he allowed the boys to pull him to his feet. "Sure, why not? I'm a whiz with a mop and a pail...coming, J.J.?"

"I don't think--"

The boys paused and looked at their father, then at Benny. "He doesn't have to, Uncle Benny," Jem said with a shrug.

"Hey, little Jack, there's no adventure without your dad," Benny said, ruffling the boy's hair. "After all, I've always been just the faithful sidekick, squire to his knight, you know?"

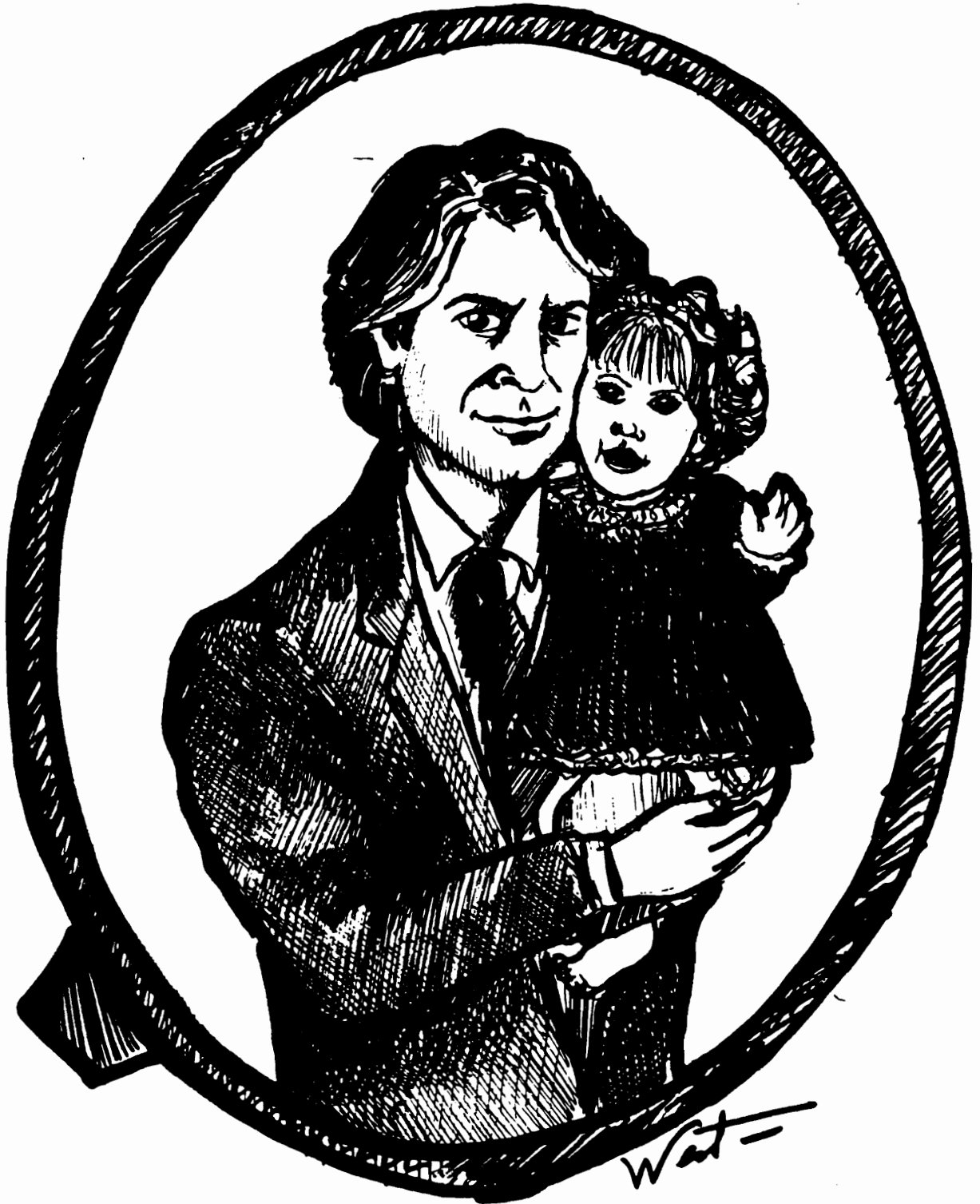
The dubious look Jem gave his father spoke volumes and Jonathan straightened his shoulders. "We did have our share of adventures," he admitted.

"All those stories you told about Dad were true?" Malcolm piped up.

"You betcha," Benny assured the boys cheerfully.

"Well, I don't know if **all** of them are true," said Jonathan cautiously, looking at Benny.

"Oh, like you didn't throw yourself in the way of the killer tree to save my life? You didn't make Jordy help you rob a graveyard to try and rescue me



when you thought I'd been buried alive? And then you came after me in the body chop shop. How about when you stepped in front of ol' Wyatt and his sixshooter at White Wood? What about the Nutty Nightingale of Hooperville General when she was gonna off me?"

Both boys' eyes grew wider and wider with each example and they looked at their father in disbelief and wonder.

"Did you do all those things, Dad?"

"Well, yes, Jem, I suppose I did. But your Uncle Benny did--"

"I can't remember all the times your Dad saved my life and he nearly got himself killed doing it. And he never asked for any thanks. Let me tell ya, little buds, I've never met a man like your Dad and I owe him a lot. He made me respectable, despite my best efforts to the contrary."

"Wow," said Malcolm, clearly impressed.

"Dad's a hero, Jem!"

"Yeah," Jem said, frowning. "I guess so."

"I know so," Caitlyn said, taking Jonathan's arm and kissing his cheek. "He was **my** hero, after all--that's how we met."

Jonathan blushed, clearly uncomfortable with the turn of the conversation. "Let's take care of the storeroom before Dr. Moorhouse makes us spend the night here." He kissed Caitlyn and added, "Take Katie Rose home and we'll see you there later, hrm?"

Caitlyn nodded and corralled their daughter who had both little arms wrapped around Benny's blue-jean clad leg. "Uncle Benny will come for dinner, punkin," she assured the shrieking Katie Rose as she pried her loose.

"You betcha, rosebud," Benny assured her, kissing the tear-streaked cheek. "Wait till you see what ol' Uncle Benny has brought his best girl."

"Pwesent?"

"The best," he said with a cheeky grin.

Katie Rose sniffled and looked at her father.

"Da go with Katie Wose?"

"I'll be home in just a little bit," Jonathan said, wiping away a tear.

"No, go now!"

"Katiekins, I bet your grandpa there has a story," Benny suggested slyly.

Katie Rose looked at Leonard. "Story?"

"Certainly," said the ghost, smiling at her. "I'll tell you a story on the way home, all right?"

"Alright," she allowed.

Caitlyn patted the child's hair, exchanged a resigned look with Jonathan and then carried her daughter from the office. Leonard MacKensie followed them out.

"Your dad's a great guy," said Benedek, drawing a sharp look from Jonathan. "You know, I wish you could get him to reconsider about that interview, Dr. J.--Len's passing up the chance of an after-lifetime."

Jonathan groaned and shook his head. "Let's go, boys." They ran out into the corridor, and the men followed. "**No, Benedek.**" Jonathan closed the door behind them. "You'll have to handle your own negotiations with my father."

"But, Jack, he just keeps vanishing on me!"

"What do you expect? He **is** a ghost."

"That's all the more reason for you to help me sign him up," Benny wheedled, on a roll now. "As his heirs, you and the family'll get a cut of the profits, Jon-boy! It'd put the kids through college and leave you and Caitydid plenty to retire on."

Smiling at the sudden familiarity of all of this, Jonathan shook his head. He wouldn't have traded his family--**all** of them--for anything in the world. "**No, Benny.** They'll cancel my subscription to the Skeptical Inquirer if I get involved in a scheme like that. Besides, if he won't cooperate with you, what makes you think I can change his mind? We MacKensies are a stubborn lot."

"Yeah, I've noticed," Benedek muttered.

Jonathan smiled and glanced at the boys, then lowered his voice. "Thank you, Benny, for what you said to them just now."

"Meant every word of it," the journalist shrugged. "They're great kids, Jonathan. Thanks for letting me hang around with them." Something flickered in his eyes, then his grin brightened. "Wait'll you see what I brought 'em from India!"

Jonathan smiled, then sneezed and suddenly looked worried. "Benedek--you didn't bring back anything that's **alive**, did you? I warned you after the last time--" He sneezed again and hurried after the threesome as they turned the corner ahead of him.