

Young at Heart

By Jane Tesh

Jonathan MacKensie shifted in his chair, trying to ease the ache in his lower back. These department committee meetings took forever, and why were the chairs always so uncomfortable? Ow. His back had never bothered him before, but lately, he'd been climbing over fences, thanks to a certain Edgar Benedek, and that had put a strain on certain unused muscles.

Getting old, he thought with a sigh, propping his chin on his hand and staring absently at the grim portrait of one of the founders of the Georgetown Institute hanging on the far wall of the committee room. Just the other day he thought he detected a few extra lines beneath his dark eyes. Amazing, too, how the students seemed to get younger ever year, bounding about the campus like so many energetic puppies, running after Frisbees and each other in the wild carefree rituals of spring.

Well, his association with Benedek had certainly added some grey hairs. For a moment, he wondered idly what his friend was up to. There had been a cryptic note in Benedek's scrawl taped to his office door: Gone to Caracas. Jonathan covered a yawn, thinking even Caracas would be preferable to this endless meeting.

"MacKensie."

A sharp whisper and a nudge on his foot brought his head up. Dr. Moorhouse glared in her usual withering style. Had he missed something? He straightened and tried to look attentive, but still his thoughts drifted. Why on earth had Benedek gone to Caracas? What sort of absurd adventure would he find himself involve in next? Just last month there had been a most peculiar incident involving nine witches and a turquoise necklace.

He sighed again and brushed a wayward strand of his long brown-gold hair out of his eyes. Too many questions. Too many odd things happening. I'm getting too old to be chasing paranormal nonsense.

At last the meeting was over, and Jonathan couldn't remember a thing that had been said.

"What in the world were you thinking about?" Dr. Moorhouse said in an accusing manner. "You looked a thousand miles away."

"Sorry," said Jonathan. "I've had a long day."

"Well, you should pay attention," she scolded. "Dr. Felson's remarks were quite illuminating."

"Yes, I'm sure they were."

"The way your mind wanders, it's a wonder you get anything done." She stacked up her notes, tapping them sharply on the table. "Have you made your travel plans for St. Arbor?"

"For St. Arbor?" he said blankly.

She swiveled her hard gaze around, astounded. "Haven't you looked at your new assignment?"

"Well, I saw the folder," Jonathan hedged.

Dr. Moorhouse sighed, exasperated. "MacKensie, you will go directly to St. Arbor. You will not pass Go. You will not collect two hundred dollars, and there is no Get Out of Jail Free card. This is a very important assignment. Professor Kirby is certain he has discovered a healing spring in the hills of the island. I want you to contact him and bring back his results."

Now what? Jonathan thought wearily. "Is there some reason Professor Kirby can't just send us his findings?"

"Communications from St. Arbor are very sketchy. In fact, Professor Kirby hasn't been heard from in several weeks."

"He's missing?"

"As I said, and if you had read the report, communications have not been their best. That's why I want you to go and see what's happened."

"Yes, but St. Arbor?" Jonathan protested. "I don't even know where that is."

Dr. Moorhouse smiled a thin humorless smile. "Then you'd better get started, hadn't you?"

Jonathan grumbled irritably as he packed his suitcase. St. Arbor! Why not the moon? Why not Transylvania? I'm tired of gallivanting all over the globe.

He'd had to get out his atlas to find St. Arbor. There it was, a tiny island near Antigua. Didn't they have telephones? A post office? Why should he spend a whole day on airplanes, which made him extremely nervous, and who knows how long tracking down the elusive Professor Kirby when the man was probably too lazy to send a postcard. It made him tired just thinking about it.

The flight to Miami was fairly smooth, and he managed to doze just a little on the flight to Antigua, waking when the flight attendant asked him if he wanted a drink. Jonathan said no, thank you, returning her warm smile. She seemed inclined to chat, but she looked about sixteen, which made him uncomfortable. He was glad when her duties called her away.

He arrived in Antigua and changed planes again, this time taking a small ten-seater to St. Arbor. He kept his eyes shut the entire flight, taking only one horrified glance at the runway, which was barely the length of a football field. The little place landed safely, however, and the sultry air hit him like a warm pillow. Outside the tiny airport, he found a sleepy taxi driver willing to transport him to the hotel. Jonathan caught glimpses of brilliant blue water, shiny green leaves, and small brightly colored houses clinging to the hills, but mainly he concerned himself with keeping his already unsettled stomach from rebelling as the little car careened wildly around narrow corkscrew curves.

The taxi wheezed and collapsed at the entrance of the Twin Palms Hotel. Jonathan climbed out on unsteady legs, thanked and paid the driver, and looked up apprehensively at the crumbling wooden building. It seemed held together by hundreds of twisting vines bursting with pink and purple blossoms.

Inside was slightly cooler, shaded and dark, ceiling fans circling slowly. A dark-skinned young lady in a pink dress was asleep at the desk, snoring gently.

"Ah, excuse me," Jonathan said, hesitant. "Excuse me? Miss?"

She lifted her head and smiled sleepily. "Good afternoon, sir." Her voice was deep and musical. "May I help you?"

"Yes, I'm looking for Professor Alfred Kirby," said Jonathan. "I was told he was staying here."

"Yes, sir," she said, stretching. "Professor Kirby is here sometime."

"Good," said Jonathan, relieved. "I have a reservation. Jonathan MacKensie."

She looked in her book and favored him with another smile. "Yes, sir. Room 203."

"Can you tell me when Professor Kirby will be in?" Jonathan asked, taking his key.

"Oh, dear me, no, sir," she said. "He come and go. Mostly he go to the mountain."

"Is it far?"

"No, sir. You can walk. The trail is clearly marked."

"I don't think I'll go just yet," said Jonathan. "If Professor Kirby should come in, would you please ring my room?"

"Yes, sir," she said, "but he probably not come in today."

"Not at all?"

The girl nodded. "Days and days sometime."

Jonathan's interest was piqued. "What does he do in the mountains?"

She shrugged elegantly. Jonathan thanked her for her help and walked up the worn stairs. Room 203 was pleasant enough, with fern patterned wallpaper and a matching bedspread. A small balcony overlooked the ocean and expanse of white sand. Louvered windows were wound about with the heavily scented flowers.

Jonathan took off his sweaty jacket and pulled off his tie. He sat down on the bed, shoulders sagging. A trip like this shouldn't be so tiring, he thought. What is it with me lately? He lay back on the bed. Look on the bright side, he told himself. This is a nice little place. Find Professor Kirby, relax a few days. No harm in that.

After a short nap and a shower, he felt considerably better. He was glad he'd remembered to bring light weight clothes, for the tropical night was balmy. The clerk was sad to report that Professor Kirby had not returned, and she didn't advise walking to the mountain at night. As Jonathan had no intention of venturing out in the dark, he assured her that morning would be soon enough.

The hotel's small dining room overlooked a sea that was now deep blue, silvered with moonlight. After admiring the view, Jonathan took a seat at one of the bamboo tables and picked up the menu.

"I'd recommend the shark burger, Jack," said a bright familiar voice. "These people really know how to grill a fish."

Jonathan dropped the menu, aghast. Edgar Benedek, in all his red and orange striped glory, grinned at him from the other chair, blue eyes dancing with mischief.

"Glad to see me?"

"My God, you're like an albatross!" Jonathan said in a stunned voice. "What are you doing here?"

"Same as you, pal," said Benny. "Lookin' for the fountain of youth."

"Fountain of youth?" Jonathan echoed, his normally calm voice up two octaves. "There is no fountain of youth! Professor Kirby is investigating reports of a healing spring!" he stared at the man in disbelief. Was no corner of the world safe? Benny grinned his ever-present toothy grin, the only thing brighter than his outlandish shirt. "I thought you were in Caracas," Jonathan said unhappily.

"Hey, Caracas is just a hop, skip, and a jump up the old island chain," Benny replied. "So what have you got on Professor Kirby?"

Jonathan sighed, resigning himself to Benny's presence. "I haven't seen him. According to the desk clerk, he spends his days in the mountains. I thought tomorrow I'd go out and see if I could find him."

"He's probably a fetus by now," Benny remarked. "One too many gulps of the old youth dew."

Jonathan gave him a disgusted look. "Don't you have something else to do?"

Benny reached over for the folder Jonathan had brought to study. "Nope. The Telekinetic Olympics was a big success. Good for at least six articles in the Register. I'm free as a bird."

"Then make like a bird and fly away," Jonathan said testily. "This is just a routine investigation. Dr. Moorhouse wants me to bring back a report on Professor Kirby and that is all."

Benny was reading. "Nobody's heard from this guy since the fourteenth? Sounds pretty mysterious to me, chum."

"There is nothing mysterious about it," Jonathan insisted. "When I'm on a dig – which is practically never these days – I lose all track of time. He's probably deeply involved in his work."

"Okay," said Benny, tossing the folder on the table. "If that's the case, then why did Dr. M send you here? She must think there's something more to it."

"She sent me here because she's got nothing better to do than think up bizarre errands for me to run," Jonathan said, glowering. "Errands I can finish without any help, thank you."

Benny chuckled. "Boy, are you in a snit, J.J. What's the matter? Don't you want to be younger?" He was surprised by the fleeting expression that crossed Jonathan's face.

"The fountain of youth is a myth," Jonathan said. "This healing spring of Professor Kirby's is probably just some kind of mineral water."

Whoa, we have hit a major nerve here, Benny thought, leaning back comfortably in his chair. You do look a bit frazzled, Jon-boy. Added a new worry to your list? And I thought we'd unwound some of that tight conservative life of yours.

"Well, I for one am interested in the vanishing prof," he said lightly. "What if I just tag along to do the color commentary? I know you, bud. If you go hiking by yourself, you'll get lost."

"Thank you so much," said Jonathan. "Your faith in me is heartening."

"Face facts, Jack," said Benny. "Your idea of the great outdoors is the main room of the Georgetown Library." He cocked his head. "Hey, hear that music? I'll bet somebody's having a party down on the beach."

"That's nice," said Jonathan, his attention on the menu.

"Let's grab a bite and go crash the party."

Since Benny's idea of a good time was to barge in where he wasn't wanted or expected, this did not surprise Jonathan in the least. "You go right ahead."

"Ah, come on, don't be such a grouch," said Benny. "You're old before your time, Jon, I'm tellin' ya. Lighten up."

There was that expression again. This time Benny was certain he was not mistaken. Jonathan's dark eyes were almost laughably easy to read. One birthday too many, eh? Maybe a gray hair in that untidy mop? Jonathan was just so damn serious about everything.

"Let me tell you about the Olympics," said Benny, swinging into overdrive. "Now, the Russians were favored to win the spoon bending event, but there was a big upset because the East Germans had a new man, and he could tie soup ladles in knots, no sweat! The American team got off to a slow start, but by the end of the day, anything that wasn't nailed down was flyin' all over the place. We took home sixteen medals. 'Course it would've been twenty, but the Chinese got testy and bent some of 'em."

As he'd hoped, his chatted momentarily distracted Jonathan from his black mood. "Olympic spoon bending?"

"The best, Jon-boy. Some of the finest in the world. I got copies of my articles in my room. You can read all about it."

"You have a room here?"

"Sure. 205. Is this fate or what?"

Jonathan sighed. "I think it's more like what."

When the waitress arrived, Benny said, "Allow me. We'll have the swordfish and the pineapple flambé – oh, and bring some ketchup." He grinned at Jonathan. "We're gonna need our strength. The Hardy Boys are on the Case of the Mysterious Spring. The Case of the Missing Professor."

"The Case of the Missing Brain," Jonathan muttered under his breath.

The morning was clear and sunny, and the trail to the mountain looked deceptively smooth, but it soon wound into lush undergrowth and towering palms, disappearing and reappearing among the rocks and fallen trees. Benny looked back in time to see Jonathan sinking down on a large stump.

"It's too hot," he complained, rolling up his shirt sleeves.

"You think this is hot, wait till afternoon," said Benny, "Come on, it can't be much further."

"Are you sure you know where you're going?" Jonathan asked, pushing back his damp hair.

"I'm just following this trail, like the girl said."

"Yes, well, this trail has a mind of its own."

"Look, pal, the island's only eleven by seven miles. We keep walking, we're bound to find something."

Jonathan wearily got to his feet. Benny was already down the trail, a bright bobbing of color in the thick green foliage.

"I think I see a house!" he called.

The house was a tiny shack a faded orange in color with a patched tin roof.

"Avon calling," Benny said cheerfully, peering in the open door.

"Is anyone here?" Jonathan asked. The little room had a cot, a chair, and a rickety table. On the table were several open notebooks and a stack of papers held down by a seashell. Jonathan put on his glasses to inspect one of the notebooks. "Look at this. Professor Kirby's notes. No, it's a journal! Listen. 'the spring contains marvelous powers that even I never suspected. If I can just continue my testing, I am certain to have found a scientific miracle.'"

"Fountain of youth, all right," said Benny.

"Not necessarily. 'I have kept the whereabouts of this spring a secret, for the people here are very superstitious and may destroy it, fearing it to be evil magic.'"

"Bingo. Youth Juice."

Jonathan ignored him. "Here's another entry for the twenty-fourth. That was yesterday. 'I am going to continue my tests and hope to have conclusive results soon. These notes are the property of Alfred Kirby, Georgetown Institute of Science, Washington, D.C., USA.'"

"Sounds like the professor took a giant step backward," Benny remarked. "Somewhere in this jungle, even as we speak, there's an egg lying on the ground saying, 'Uh-oh.'"

Jonathan was looking through the notebooks. "It doesn't say anywhere that he found a fountain of youth," he argued. "Just a spring with certain powers. That could mean anything."

"Well, I say we go have a look." Benny started out.

"What, search this whole jungle? We should wait here until he comes back."

Benny leaned on the door. "Jon, he's not coming back, not unless he crawls in, lookin' for his teddy bear."

"You don't honestly believe Professor Kirby drank some water that turned him into a baby!"

"Yup. Come on."

Reluctantly, Jonathan followed. "But he said the location of the spring was a secret. You

don't propose we go over all of this?" His gesture took in the expanse of trees and vines.

"What else have we got to do?" Benny asked. "Unless you're too tired."

Stung, Jonathan retorted, "I am not in the least bit tired."

"Great. Let's go."

"But you haven't the slightest idea which way to go!"

Benny licked a finger and held it up. "North by northwest," he declared and plunged into the brush.

During the next few hours, Jonathan followed Benny's progress with growing impatience. Frolicking over stones and branches, forging new trails, and doing practically everything except swinging from the vines, Benny made his way deeper into the lush forest. Jonathan came after him at a much slower pace, stubbing his toes repeatedly on rocks, and once, almost falling down the side of the slippery hill. He was hot, tired, and highly annoyed, but determined not to let Benny get the better of him.

Old before my time, am I? And who's the cause of it, I wonder?

At length, Benny came to a clearing where he flopped down on the grass, fanning himself with a palm leaf. "I'm beginning to think this guy doesn't exist anymore."

Jonathan sat down and wiped his face with his handkerchief. "Then we can safely assume the location of this spring is indeed a secret?"

"It's only a secret till we find it, bud. Yo! Check out the wildlife."

Jonathan looked around nervously. "Where?"

"Just some little birds over there."

A group of grey birds peered at them shyly from underneath thick ferns.

"What kind's that, Jonny?"

"Looks like some sort of dove," he answered. "They're awfully small, though."

"Rare Pygmy Doves Discovered on Island Paradise," Benny intoned. "Hey, we've got some baby butterflies, too."

A swirl of blue and white butterflies clustered on the ground, wings opening and closing in rhythm.

Benny jumped to his feet. "We must be gettin' close, Jack! All these animals are really young."

Jonathan laughed. "They're just small."

"No, no! Look at this! Look at this baby lizard." A fat speckled gecko glared from a tree trunk.

"No, thank you," said Jonathan, getting up. Where there were lizards, there might also be snakes.

Benny was grinning in triumph. "We're closin' in on it, J.J. Come on."

He was off again, and Jonathan, with one more cautious glance at the lizard, followed. When he heard Benny's shout of glee, he hurried forward. Just beyond a bank of ferns was a pool of blue-black water surrounded by tiny pink and blue flowers.

"Don't drink that!" Jonathan exclaimed.

Benny paused, his cupped hand full of water. "Just a few years, Jack, that's all."

"You don't know what's in there. It could be poisonous, alkaline--"

"I'll spit it out, okay?" He noticed Jonathan was staring at a branch just above the pool. "What? What?"

Jonathan swallowed. "I thought I saw a snake."

Benny back off. "Where?"

"Right there, on that branch."

"Ah, you did not."

"I hate snakes."

Benny laughed. "You got enough phobias for a psychology manual, you know that? Now let me sample this stuff and –whoops." His grin faded. "Jonathan, hold real still. I think you may have been right."

It was Jonathan's turn to grin. "You're not going to fool me with that old routine, Benedek."

"Honest, pal. There's a big snake right behind you."

"And some lizards, too, right?" Jonathan turned to look, and the large striped snake behind him raised its head and hissed. He gave a terrified yell, jumped back, and tumbled into the pool.

Benny wasn't sure whether to laugh or not and finally decided it was worth a chuckle. "You scared him but good, Jack." He waded out to give Jonathan a hand. Jonathan was coughing and spluttering and trying to sit up. "Is it alkaline? Are my feet melting? Come on, Jonny." He caught his hand. "It's gone."

It took all his strength to haul Jonathan out of the water. His friend was dazed and gasping. "Come on now, pal," said Benny, concerned. "You're okay." He sat him down. "Take it easy, Jon. I don't have a paper bag handy. Deep breaths." He waited until he was certain Jonathan had caught his breath. "Okay?" When he didn't answer right away, Benny frowned. "What's the matter? Jonathan?"

Jonathan's eyes were wide and bewildered. "Where's Daddy?" he asked in a light troubled voice.

"Daddy?" Benny echoed, startled. "Whoa, hold on here!" he turned his friend's face for a better look. He'd always found Jonathan's expression to be amusingly innocent, but the dark eyes were totally without guile, completely . . . childlike.

"Uh, oh," he said, his heart sinking. "Say it ain't so." He glanced at the water and then yanked off his shoes, expecting to see new tiny toes. No, they were okay. "You must have swallowed some. Oh, brother! It works. It really works!"

Jonathan looked around, his lower lip trembling. "Where's this? Is Daddy here?"

"Uh, no, no, he's not," said Benny, keeping his voice very calm. "Jonathan, look here." The trusting dark gaze filled him with horror. "I'm a really good friend of your dad's. My name's Benny, okay?" Jonathan nodded. "Good. Great. Now, I want you to tell me how old you are. Can you tell me?"

Jonathan thought for a moment and carefully counted on his fingers. "Four," he said.

Oh, god. Benny managed a cheerful smile. "Four? Well, you're certainly a big boy for four."

The smile Jonathan gave him was so utterly charming he almost forgot what he was going to say next.

"Uh, I think we need to get you home now. Just a sec." He found an empty film can in his pocket and filled it with some of the water. "Up you go."

Jonathan got up unsteadily. "Are there any snakes in these woods?" he asked worriedly.

"I'll take care of everything, don't worry," said Benny, thinking how things hadn't changed that much. He felt a tug on his shirt and found Jonathan holding on and gazing around apprehensively. Despite his concerns, Benny couldn't help but grin. "It's okay, kid. Trust me. Believe me, you've done it before."

Finding the way back was a tedious process. Benny had no idea where he was, and Jonathan got slower and slower.

"Come on, Jonathan, you can do it," he said, helping him over a large rock. Jonathan frowned, gauging the distance. "It's not that far," Benny assured him. When he finally hopped down, Benny patted him on the shoulder. "Good boy. I don't suppose you could walk a little faster?"

"When are we going to be home?" Jonathan asked plaintively. "We've been walking for hours."

"I've heard this song before," Benny said. "Just a little further," he added in what he hoped was a comforting tone. He liked children and had a certain rapport with them, but he hadn't had any experience with four year olds, especially not six foot four year olds. "It might have been easier if you'd gotten smaller," he remarked. "This is going to put a new wrinkle in Dr. M's forehead, that's for sure."

Jonathan rubbed his eyes. "Are we going to be there soon?"

"Hang in there, Jonny. You're gonna have to keep walking. I can't carry you."

"Okay," he said, "but I'm really tired."

"I know," said Benny, "but you're doing a great job." Jonathan brightened and favored Benny with another winning smile. Sheesh, Benny thought. Who'd have thought you'd be such a pleasant kid? I guess at four you hadn't reached your full level of anxiety.

By the time Benny found the trail, it was twilight, and Jonathan was stumbling on his feet, half asleep.

"Are we there yet?"

"Not quite." Benny had him by the arm. "You're doing fine, Jonathan."

"There aren't any ghosts out here, I hope."

The comment caught Benny off guard. "Ghosts? Uh, no, no, Jonny. It's safe."

"You know what? Reggie told me there was some ghosts in his house."

"Oh, yeah? Well, there aren't any around here."

"I don't think I'd like to see one," he said. "Well, maybe if it was far away. My dad says there's no such thing."

"Your dad is probably right."

"Do you believe in ghosts?"

"Not me," Benny lied stoutly.

Jonathan looked relieved. A skeptic is born, Benny thought, and it's all my fault. I'll pay for this.

"Are we there yet?"

"See those lights over there?" Benny pointed toward what he hoped was the Twin Palms Hotel. "That's it."

"That's not my house," Jonathan said with a frown.

"We're going to stay there tonight, and tomorrow we'll go to your house, okay?"

Jonathan considered this. "Okay," he said finally.

"Boy, am I glad you're being reasonable," said Benny. "How come you don't cooperate with me like this all the time?"

To Benny's relief, the hotel came into view. He got Jonathan up to his room. Yawning hugely, Jonathan stumbled to the bed and lay down, curling up comfortably. Benny covered him with the fern-patterned bedspread and sat down, resting his head in his hands. Whew. Maybe it was all a mistake. Maybe Jonathan would wake up tomorrow his usual self. Nahh, he knew better than that. Jonathan had a talent for attracting all the wrong sort of paranormal experiences. If there was a flaming spear from King Tut flying about, it landed in Jonathan's lap. If a witch was looking for a midnight snack, guess who was on the menu? It was a handy talent sometimes, but in this case, Benny wasn't sure what to do. His mind was uncharacteristically blank.

Get some rest, he told himself. Tomorrow you can think clearer.

He started out and paused at the door. Could one leave a four year old alone all night? Hmm. This could be tricky. After a moment's pondering, he pulled a chair closer to the bed so he could prop up his feet. He settled in for the night.

He woke when the bright tropical sun picked its way through the louvered windows. Jonathan was still asleep, and for a moment, Benny thought he might have dreamed the whole incident. Then Jonathan rolled over and gazed at him sleepily.

"You're not my father," he said.

"And you're not the cranky anthropologist we all know and love," Benny said.

"Where's my dad?" Jonathan wasn't upset, just puzzled. "And Mum. Where is she?"

"They had to go out for a little while," said Benny, improvising hurriedly. Jonathan sat up, rubbing his eyes. "Say, are you hungry? How about some milk or something? You need any help changing your clothes? Those are pretty wrinkled."

Jonathan looked at him scornfully. "I can dress myself."

"You don't know how happy that makes me," Benny said with a grin. He got up stiffly from the chair and picked out some appropriate items from Jonathan's suitcase. "You get dressed, brush your hair, we'll go grab some Cheerios."

Jonathan behaved very politely at the table, attracting no undue attention. He had a lot of questions and kept inquiring anxiously about his parents. Benny racked his brain, trying to remember any off-hand remarks Jonathan might have made regarding his childhood. From a few references, Benny knew his friend's early years had been pleasant and secure, unlike his own disjointed existence. Surely the famous Dr. Leonard MacKensie had gone on long trips. Would he have taken his wife and left Jonathan behind? It was worth a shot.

"Jonathan, your dad's gone on a trip, and this time your mom went along to keep him company." The wide dark gaze never left his face. "Now, they'll be back soon. Meanwhile, I'll be here."

"Okay," he said, but Benny could tell he wasn't too happy about it.

While he ate, Benny considered his options. He could stay here and try to find Professor Kirby. He could take Jonathan home, contact Theo, and see if they could cook up a cure. He could call Theo and have him send something down here. That would take too long. And what would he do with Jonathan while he searched for Professor Kirby? He didn't feel like dragging him through the jungle again.

"Use your fork for that, Jonny," he instructed, seeing his friend struggling with a stubborn piece of pineapple.

Maybe the best thing to do was get him home. If Jonathan saw his house, the Georgetown campus, and all the familiar things, maybe he'd snap out of it.

"Tell you what, bud," he said. "Before we blow this pop stand, I'm leaving a message for the phantom professor. If he shows, I want him to know what happened. Maybe he's got an antidote." But Benny seriously doubted the professor would surface. He was almost certain Kirby was a memory by now. "All through? Clean your plate? Okay, let's go home."

Jonathan was entranced by the plane ride and stared out the window all the way to Florida.

"Boy, this is a switch," Benny commented. "The last time we were on a plane, you were leaving grip marks in the arm rests."

"How do we stay up in the air?" Jonathan asked.

"Beats me, kid."

"What's that down there?"

"Looks like Miami."

"What's Miami?"

"A city in Florida. That's a state," he added, hoping to forestall the next question. No luck.

"A state? What's a state?"

"You know, one of the fifty United States."

"But where's England?"

Benny chuckled. "Oh, yeah. I forgot. England's on the other side of all that water."

Jonathan's eyes got larger. "It is? Aren't we going there?"

"Ah, maybe later."

"Are we going to where Dad and Mum are?"

"No, we're going someplace else," said Benny. "But you'll like it."

"Shall I?" Jonathan asked doubtfully.

"I hope so, 'cause that's where we're going."

"Down there?"

"No, Georgetown."

Jonathan brightened. "Like King George?"

"Sure, why not."

"I know all the kings and queens," Jonathan said. "I have a book of them at home. What's that?" He pointed.

Benny leaned over to look. "That's the runway where we're going to land. Then we'll get on another plane."

"Another? Oh, good!"

"Yeah, great," said Benny, tired of answering questions and anticipating more trouble ahead. He managed to convince Jonathan not to hold his hand in the airport. He kept a firm grip on his friend's arm and hoped it looked as if he were helping a foreigner through the maze of Miami International. Intrigued by the brightly colored shops, Jonathan would have wandered into

each one had Benny not kept them moving at a quick pace.

Once on board the flight to Washington, Jonathan fell asleep, but his nap didn't last long. He was wide awake and full of energy the rest of the way home. By the time they reached Georgetown and Jonathan's house, Benny was exhausted. He thought if he heard one more question, he would scream and possibly commit child abuse. Much to his dismay, Jonathan didn't recognize the house or anything in it. He was immediately interested in the large amount of books, the stereo, and the pile of old bones left over from a previous expedition.

"What are these?" he asked a weary Benny, who had collapsed on the couch.

"Those are some old bones," he answered. "Very much like mine."

"Bones?"

"Yeah, you know. After the skin falls off, you got bones left."

"Are these animal bones or people bones?"

Benny had to laugh. "Jon-boy, that's what you're gonna spend the rest of your life tryin' to figure out." He reached for the phone. "Theo, you better be in."

After three rings, Theo answered. "On my way out. Call later."

"Wait! Wait!" Benny cried. "Theo, it's me, Benny! I got a real emergency here."

"Oh, Benny," he said. "What's the problem?"

"You remember my buddy Jonathan, don't you? Well, he accidentally fell into a sort of fountain of youth and now he's four years old, mentally. Physically, he's still the same. I gotta have an antidote."

"Benny, I'm in a real bind here," Theo replied. "Marsha just called me."

"Mishap Marsha, all thumbs, no brains?"

"The very same."

"Don't tell me she made herself invisible again."

"I warned her, Benny. I warned her quite strongly."

"Yeah, I'm sure you did, but look, can't it wait? I'm not cut out to be a parent."

"I'm sorry, Benny. I've got to go right over," said Theo. "Tell you what. I'll send you Shelley. She's one of my most promising trainees. She'll do a good job for you, Benny."

"How soon can she be here?"

"I'll beep her right now."

"Thanks, Theo. Good luck with Marsha."

"I shall scold her quite thoroughly," he said, "the next time I see her, that is!"

Jonathan was on the floor, carefully examining the bones. "Can I have some of these?" he asked.

"Sure," said Benny. "They're all yours."

There was that smile again. "Thank you," Jonathan said. "This is the motorway over here," he explained, pointing to a line of bones, "and that's the garage over there. And this," he picked up a large vertebra. "This is the helicopter. It's going to pick up some people over here who've had a wreck. Watch."

Benny obligingly watched. "That's some imagination you've got there, Jonny. Where you been hiding it?"

Jonathan worked out an increasingly complex scenario. "Now these people need to get

to Scotland because their pet monster is hungry. Here comes the helicopter.” He made a whirring sound. “Help, help, we have to get to Scotland. Okay, I’ll help you. Here I come. Yow, look out! You’re going to crash. No, I made it. Get on, get on.”

Benny thought Jonathan might go on in this vein for some time, but abruptly he stopped. “What’s the matter?” Benny asked.

Two large tears rolled down Jonathan’s cheeks. “I think I miss my mother.”

Benny patted him on the shoulder. “hey, pal, don’t cry. I told you she’d be back soon, didn’t I?” Gosh, now what? He thought. There’s no way I can get his mother to show up. Guess it’s time to call in reinforcements. “You play with that helicopter some more while I make another phone call,” he said. “Everything’s going to be all right, I promise.”

“Whoo, damn, I’m glad you’re here. I’ve never answered so many questions in my life.”

Dr. Moorhouse stepped inside, her expression set. “here’s another one for you, Benedek: why have you called me out of a very important meeting?”

“Is there any other kind?” he countered, and when she stiffened, said, “Okay, okay, don’t get your knickers in a twist. Jonathan’s not himself today. Well, he is, only he isn’t. Come on in. Welcome to Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood.”

“I thought you were in South America,” she said, following him to the living room. “What is all this?” She frowned at the scattered bones. “MacKensie, what are you doing on the floor? You’re supposed to be on St. Arbor.”

Jonathan looked up, wide-eyed. “These are mine.”

“Well, of course they are, but there’s no need to reconstruct the elephants’ graveyard. Clean up this mess and get off the floor. I want a full report on Professor Kirby.”

“I’m afraid he won’t be ready for about thirty years,” said Benny. “Jonathan, this is the lady I was telling you about, remember?”

Dr. Moorhouse moved in for a closer look. Jonathan’s expression was oddly serene. “Remember? Are you telling me he’s lost his memory?”

“Not exactly,” said Benny. “There’s just not that much to remember yet.”

She gave him a sharp glance. “What are you saying?”

“Jonathan, tell this lady how old you are.”

“I’ve already told you,” Jonathan said.

“Tell her.”

“Four,” said Jonathan, holding up four fingers. “Almost five. My birthday’s real soon.”

Dr. Moorhouse took another long look into the clear eyes. She stepped back. “Oh, my heavens.” She rounded on Benny. “Benedek, what have you done this time?”

“Me?” he yelped, offended. “Jonathan takes a header into the fountain of youth and you’re blaming me?”

“Fountain of youth? What nonsense is this? MacKensie was investigating a healing spring!”

“Yeah, well, it turned out to be a little more than that.”

“So I see!”

Jonathan had found a large book that interested him. He carefully turned the pages, frowning thoughtfully.

"Loves to read," Benny remarked.

Dr. Moorhouse was shaking her head in dismay. "Benedek, something must be done!"

"Is there a Montessori school around here? I'm thinkin' special schools, tutors. This is one bright kid."

"Don't make jokes!" she warned. "He can't stay this way."

"I'm workin' on it," said Benny. "Theo's sending someone over right away."

"Oh, that's all we need! One of that witch doctor's accomplices."

"You got a better idea?"

She slowly sat down on the couch. "You make me feel a thousand years old."

"I can fix that," he grinned, patting his pocket. "Got some of the old magic youth juice right here."

"You brought some with you?"

"Sure. Properly analyzed and used with caution, this could save the world."

"I can't share your enthusiasm," she said bitterly. "It certainly didn't help Jonathan."

"That's because he drank too much! We can experiment to find just the right amount. I figure I'll call it Leonade, after Ponce de Leon. Whadda ya think?"

She glared. "I think you're insane. What happened on St. Arbor? And what were you doing there? Where is Professor Kirby?"

Benny was choosing which question to answer first when Jonathan looked up from his book.

"Aunt Juli?"

Dr. Moorhouse turned an alarmed gaze to Benny. "What did he call me?"

He grinned. "Aunt Juli. Cute, isn't it?"

"You taught him that!"

"So what do you want to be called? Grandma?"

"Aunt Juli?" Jonathan said.

She mastered her livid expression and spoke calmly. "Yes, Jonathan?"

"Will you read this to me?"

"I suppose so."

Beaming, Jonathan climbed up on the couch and sat as close as he could. Dr. Moorhouse cast Benny a look that would have fried a lesser man.

Benny laughed. "What can I say? He likes you. Trusting little soul, isn't he?"

Unable to meet Jonathan's open countenance, Dr. Moorhouse quickly opened the book and began to read. Every now and then she raised her eyes to give Benny a look of pure fury.

When the doorbell rang, Jonathan kept his attention on the book, but Benny leaped up.

"That must be Shelley."

His hopes sank when he saw the vacuous-looking teenage girl with her mop of frizzled blonde hair. She had a knapsack over one shoulder and she was blowing lurid purple bubbles from a thick wad of chewing gum.

"Hi," she said somewhat indistinctly. "Mr. Benedek? I'm Shelley."

"Come on in," he said. "Just call me Benny." She nodded, her pale blue eyes vacant. "Right this way," he motioned, wondering if walking would take too much effort.

Shelley wandered into the living room. Jonathan was back on the floor, choosing another book from the lower shelf. She brightened. "Oh, wow. Theo didn't tell me he was so cute."

Benny could see Dr. Moorhouse swelling with indignation. "Uh, Shelley, just how long have you been working with Theo?"

She stooped down by Jonathan. "Hi! What's your name?"

"Jonathan," he answered warily.

"How old are you, Jonathan?"

"I've already told everybody," he said impatiently.

Benny took Shelley's arm and pulled her to her feet. "He's been real good all morning. Let's not upset him."

"Sure thing." She popped her gum. "So what's the problem?"

"What's the problem?" Dr. Moorhouse echoed. "He thinks he's four years old, thanks to some sort of fountain of youth."

"Wow, that is heavy," said Shelley, impressed.

"Didn't Theo tell you anything?" Benny felt he was rapidly losing ground.

"He gave me this address and told me to get right over," she said, chewing. "He mentioned something about a guy thinking he was a kid. He also said you were one of his best customers." She gave Dr. Moorhouse a smile. "Guess this kind of thing just happens naturally to some people, huh?"

"Not to me," said Dr. Moorhouse in her frostiest tone.

"Well," Shelley said, shifting her gum to one cheek, "I haven't had a lot of experience in the field, but I do know a few things. I'm gonna need a sample of that fountain water."

"Got that right here," said Benny.

Shelley swung her knapsack off her shoulder. "I brought a few things with me, but I'm gonna need some soda, some lime, some white vinegar, some salt, and a Pepsi."

"A Pepsi?"

"Yeah, for me. I'm thirsty."

"Benedek," Dr. Moorhouse hissed.

He tried to be soothing. "I know, I know. It's a little unorthodox, but let's give it a shot."

"How do we know she won't turn him into a toad?" she asked sarcastically.

"Oh, I'm past that," Shelley assured her.

Dr. Moorhouse turned the full power of her angry glare on Benny. "If you don't get her out of here, I shall have to indulge in a few primal screams."

"Let me show you the kitchen," Benny said to Shelley. "You can set up in there."

Jonathan was waiting with another book, his expression hopeful. "Oh, all right," Dr. Moorhouse said, resigned. She knew his father had read a lot to him; his mother, too. That was one reason he'd been such a good student, aside from the burning desire to please his father. If that absurd Benedek and Goldberg's floozy didn't find a cure, who would look after Jonathan? He'd been a relatively independent child, as she recalled, but he couldn't be left alone, not in this

state, and certainly not with Benedek. He'd pick up all sorts of dreadful habits.

He sat close to her, one hand resting on her knee, drinking in every word. He'd always been easy to manage, not from any lack of intelligence, but because he was an agreeable child, sensitive to others' moods. Was this why he'd taken to her immediately? She was flattered and at the same time very uncomfortable. Emotions were surfacing that she thought were buried and gone.

Shelley unpacked all her equipment and spread it out on the kitchen table. "I really appreciate the chance to try out some stuff," she said to Benny, who was growing more apprehensive by the moment.

"Yeah, well, Jonathan's no guinea pig. Just get him back to normal."

"Got the water?"

He handed her the film container. "Be careful. It's all I've got."

"I'll get this analyzed first."

"Do you have any idea how long this is gonna take?" he asked.

"I'll work as fast as I can," she promised.

Benny hung around until he was satisfied the girl seemed to know what she was doing. When he returned to the living room, he found Jonathan asleep with his head on Dr. Moorhouse's shoulder.

"Ah, that's so sweet," he said, grinning.

"Shh!" she said in a fierce whisper. "You don't know the first thing about children, Benedek. How long has he been up?"

"Gee, I don't know. We got in from Miami about one."

"Has he had anything to eat?"

"He wasn't hungry."

"Good heavens! You don't ask children, you tell them. Help me get him to bed."

"Just let him sack out on the couch," said Benny. "I'm tired of hauling him around."

"Then go get a pillow and a blanket."

Benny gave her a salute. "Yes, ma'am."

He brought back the requested articles and helped her settle Jonathan on the couch. She then turned on him, speaking in a tightly controlled voice.

"I thought the sleeping potion incident was your crowning glory, Benedek, but you have outdone yourself this time."

"Don't get in such an uproar," said Benny, still grinning. "I'll admit this is a little strange, but how often do you get the chance to see what someone was like when he was a kid?"

"As soon as he's back to normal, I want you to leave," she said. "Go back to your slimy little newspaper. That's where you belong."

"This wasn't my fault!" Benny protested. The seriousness of her tone made him uneasy. "You're the one who sent him to that island."

"I am putting an end to this association. MacKensie can carry on very well without you."

"No, he can't," said Benny. "You know he can't. Sure, he's learned a lot, and he's got great potential, but when it comes to being down and dirty, he just doesn't have the knack."

"Thank God," she said with feeling.

"You know what I mean. The next time some paranormal creep comes after him, what's he going to do? He'll be looking for a rational, logical explanation while the vampire sucks him dry."

"You are a menace," she said. "The minute he's cured, you are out of his life, do you understand me?"

"You might want to check with Jonathan on that," said Benny, retreating to the kitchen.

"He has no say in this matter," she called after him.

"Then he might as well stay four years old," was Benny parting shot.

Shelley had made little progress, but assured Benny she was on the right track. "The old lady giving you trouble?" she asked, seeing his expression.

"She's a little upset. She'll get over it."

"I ought to have something for you soon," Shelley promised, popping her gum.

Dr. Moorhouse left late that afternoon. She was presiding at the regional meeting of the honors society that evening and couldn't find a substitute at this late date. Benny was glad to see her go. He could detect no signs of thawing. She seemed deadly serious about her threat.

Jonathan woke from his nap and played happily with the bones.

"Where's that train set I gave you for Christmas?" Benny asked him. "I know you. You probably packed it away someplace safe. Time to hit the toy store."

There was nothing in the refrigerator Benny considered edible, so he told Shelley to keep an eye on Jonathan while he went to the shopping center. She agreed, glancing up briefly from the cluttered table.

When Benny returned, he found Jonathan carefully folding some typing paper into hills and bridges for his bone town.

"Inventive, aren't you?" Benny remarked. "Hey, what's in your mouth?"

Jonathan took the purple gum out of his mouth and showed him. "Bubble gum."

"Shelley give you that?"

He nodded.

"Show Benny how you can blow a bubble, Jonathan," Shelley called from the kitchen.

Jonathan put the gum back in his mouth, chewed a while, and blew a lopsided but decent-sized bubble that popped noisily. He grinned, pleased.

"How'd you do that?" Benny called to the girl. "I can't get him to try anything new."

She came in, wiping her hands on her jeans. "he learns real fast." She perched on the edge of a chair. "What's he like, really? I mean, when he's his regular age."

"Nowhere near as agreeable," said Benny. "Real cautious, pretty serious, and very stubborn."

"Hmm," she said. "Sounds like Capricorn, but I'm not sure. He's awfully friendly and imaginative. IS he an emotional person? Fairly sensitive?"

Benny nodded. "A real pushover."

"Pisces," she said.

"You got it." He gave her an admiring look. "You're pretty good at this. So guess me."

"That's easy. Gemini."

"Whoa! I'm impressed!"

Shelley ticked the characteristics off on her fingers. "Curious, lively, restless, talkative, witty, with a special talent for communication and language. You're a journalist, right? A writer?"

"On the button," he said.

She grinned. "Well, I knew that part. It's interesting that you two are friends. It's an odd combination. Ordinarily, Pisces thinks Gemini talks too much, and Gemini finds Pisces hopelessly romantic."

"Have you been following us around?"

"Sometimes it works." Shelley smiled as Jonathan blew another successful bubble. "Pisces are intensely loyal to their friends."

"I hope you're right about that."

She stood up. "Well, I'd better get back to work. That stuff's had time to settle."

"What about the water?" Benny asked. "Have you got anything yet?"

"It's real odd, Benny," she said. "So far it looks like plain old water."

By nightfall, she was still working away. Benny suggested she call it a day and come back in the morning, but she insisted on staying.

"I'm getting close, Benny," she said, chewing her gum furiously.

Jonathan wandered into the kitchen, and it took both of them to answer all his questions and keep him out of the various bottles, jars, dishes, and tubes Shelley had scattered about.

"I can't understand it," Benny remarked, taking a flask of vile-looking orange liquid out of Jonathan's hands. "How come you're so damned inquisitive now, and when we're on a case, you see only one side of things? No, don't drink that. I'll get you some milk."

"Jonathan, put that down," said Shelley.

"What is it?" he asked.

"I'm making something special for you, but it's not ready yet. If you wait, it'll be real good."

"All right," he said.

"You're magic, Shell," Benny said, steering Jonathan to the counter.

"Three brothers," she said. "All Scorpio, if you can imagine."

Jonathan drank his milk and ate the peanut butter sandwich Benny had hastily slapped together.

"It's getting late, chum," Benny told him. "The dreaded bedtime looms on the horizon."

Jonathan shook his head. "I don't want to go to bed."

"Hey, pal, if I had my way, we'd camp out with the all night movie, but Dr. M'll have my hide if she finds you up past eight. I'd say a growing boy needs his rest, but I don't want you to get any bigger."

"Then can I stay up?" he asked.

"Maybe a little longer."

"I want to help Shelley cook."

"I don't think that's such a good idea," Benny began, stopping when Jonathan's face fell.

"Sure you can help me cook," said Shelley. "It's okay, Benny. I'll give him a bowl and

some colored water. It'll keep him happy."

"You really are savin' my life here," said Benny, thinking he'd certainly misjudged the vague-looking teen.

"Virgo," she replied. "Careful, efficient, practical, and tidy – only in my case, tidy's on the cusp." She motioned to the disordered kitchen. "I do have a system."

Jonathan was content to carefully stir some red water and watch Shelley work. After twenty minutes of this, he agreed to go to bed. He took his own bath, splashing a great deal, and got into his pajamas. He insisted Benny leave on a light.

"Okay, and I'll leave the door open, too," said Benny. There was a small lamp on the desk that gave a warm yellow glow. "How's that?"

"I'm not so sure about ghosts," Jonathan admitted.

"There are no ghosts in this house," said Benny, pulling up the covers. "Believe me, everything in this place is as straight as it can be."

Jonathan was blinking sleepily. "I wish Daddy would hurry up and come home," he said wistfully.

"I know how you feel, kid," said Benny. "My dad's been gone a long time, too."

"Will he be home tomorrow? Will they both be home?"

"Maybe so, pal. We'll see." We'll see. How often had he heard those comfortless words? They sounded just as empty now. "Shelley and I are right downstairs. See you in the morning."

"Good night, Benny," he replied with a yawn.

Benny paused at the door. Jonathan always called him "Benedek" in varying degrees of annoyance. How odd to hear him say Benny.

Sorry I got you into this, buddy. Seems like you're always getting the short end of the stick. Well, you wanted to be younger, didn't you?

"Benny, I'm all out of magnesium," said Shelley. "I'm gonna go home, get a little sleep, and come back in the morning."

"You can stay here if you like," Benny offered.

"Thanks, but I'll go on home." She gave his arm an encouraging squeeze. "Don't worry. I'll figure this out."

Benny dozed on the couch, waking every few seconds, thinking he'd heard Jonathan.

Being a father is the pits, he decided as he punched the sofa cushion into a more comfortable shape. Before drifting off to sleep, he wondered again if Dr. Moorhouse would make good on her threat. Heck, jon wouldn't let her get away with that, would he? He could stand up to the old girl for once in his life – if he wanted to.

If and when he comes out of this, he may not want to, a nagging little voice said. This could be the excuse he's been looking for.

Shelley ringing the doorbell woke him around eight the next morning. "Hiya, kid, whatcha got?" he greeted, rubbing his face.

She held up a paper bag. "I think this oughta do the trick."

Benny followed her to the kitchen. "Did you hear from Theo? He was supposed--" He stopped. The kitchen door was ajar. "Did you leave this door open?"

"No."

“Uh-oh.” Benny made a mad dash up the stairs. “Jonathan!”

Jonathan’s bed was empty, sheets and pajamas in a tangle. Benny looked in the bathroom and the closet, then he galloped back down the stairs, through the kitchen, and out the back door.

“Jonathan!”

Sheesh! Think like a kid now. Where would you go if you were four years old? Someplace noisy and dangerous. Well, that’s where I’d go, he thought, but Jon Junior seems like a quiet kind of kid. There must have been something in the neighborhood that attracted his attention.

“Do you see him?” Shelley called worriedly.

“I’m gonna scout around,” said Benny. “Stay put in case he comes back to the house.”

Benny jogged down the street, calling Jonathan’s name. Fortunately, this was a quiet neighborhood, not much traffic, no unfriendly dogs.

Dogs.

Would Jonathan have gone after a dog? The adult Jonathan kept away from animals, being allergic to most of them, but was this Jonathan in the pre-allergy stage?

“Jonathan!” he called. “Yo! Jonny! Come on, pal, where are you?”

There was a small park at the end of the street, and Benny headed in that direction. He heard a faint yowling sound and then Jonathan’s voice, softly coaxing.

“Come on, come on.”

“Jonathan?” Puzzled, Benny wandered among the trees until he was alerted by a rustling sound and saw Jonathan’s bare feet on an upper branch of one of the larger trees. “Whoa! There you are. What’s up, besides yourself?”

Jonathan peered down through the leaves. “A cat is stuck. I can’t get it to come down.”

“It can get down by itself,” Benny said. “The important thing is for you to come down.”

More rustling. The branch Jonathan was standing on swayed dangerously. “I can’t reach it,” he said.

“Jonathan, forget the cat and come down.”

“But it’s stuck,” he argued. “I heard it crying, and I’m trying to save it.”

“This is a fine time to start your knight errant phase,” said Benny. “If you fall out of that tree, I’m gonna kill you, you hear me?”

“Come on, kitty, come on.”

“Jonathan,” Benny said, exasperated, “we’ve survived a plane crash, murderous cults, demons, witches, and maybe even the sinking of the Titanic in another life, so I’ll be damned if you break your neck falling out of a tree. I can’t believe you got up there in the first place.”

There was a sudden ear-splitting yowl and a ball of orange and white fur came cannonballing out of the tree and whizzed past Benny’s ear.

“I got it down!” Jonathan said happily, the branch creaking.

“Great. Wonderful. Now you come down.”

There was a long pause. “I can’t,” Jonathan said in a small voice.

“You got up there, didn’t you?” Benny sighed. “Come on, Jonathan. Aunt Juli’s gonna fry us alive if she finds out you’ve been playing Tarzan.” He carefully climbed up on a lower branch. “I’m going out on a limb for you, bud. You know how I feel about heights.” He reached

Jonathan's foot. "Here. Put your foot on this other branch. That's good. Okay, now the other one. Is this déjà vu, or what? Just the other day I was trying to get you over a fence." He hopped down. "Okay now, jump."

"Benny," Jonathan said worriedly.

"Jump! You're not as short as you think you are, trust me."

It took quite a while to convince Jonathan to jump, but at last he did. Benny took him by the arm. "You had me worried, pal. I didn't know where you were. Don't wander off like that. There are women all over this city in big cars who'll come by and pick you up. And what are you doing outside without your shoes? I guess I should be glad you've got your clothes on."

"There was this cat in the yard," Jonathan explained. "I wanted to pat it, but it ran away, so I came after it."

"So you chased it down the street and up a tree. Good thinking. If Aunt Juli's on the doorstep when we get home, let me do the talking, okay?"

There was no sign of Dr. Moorhouse at Jonathan's. Benny heaved a sigh of relief.

"Shelley!" Jonathan exclaimed happily, giving the girl a hug.

"All right!" she said. "How's my big boy?"

"I saved a cat."

"Good for you!"

"Can I have some more gum?"

"Sure thing."

"After breakfast," Benny said, going to the cabinets. "We have Sugar Toasties, Animal Bits, and Circus Pops. Sit over here, Jonny, and I'll pour you a little of each." He spoke to Shelley. "He was up a tree."

"My goodness," she said. "Jonathan, you're going to have to be more careful."

Benny flopped into a chair. "I don't know what gets into kids these days." The phone rang. "There's our auntie checkin' up on us." He picked up the receiver. "Yo. Benedek's Day Care. We never close."

"Mr. Benedek?" said a faint voice. "This is Alfred Kirby. I got your message. What seems to be the problem?"

Benny sat up. "Professor Kirby! Boy, am I glad to hear from you! We thought you were history."

The voice was bewildered. "I don't think we have a good connection, Mr. Benedek."

"It's about that fountain of youth," said Benny. "You know."

"What do you mean? What fountain of youth?"

Benny felt a growing sense of foreboding. "The one you discovered on St. Arbor."

"I don't know anything about a fountain of youth," said Professor Kirby. "I found a remarkable spring I'm pleased to say has yielded a wonderful supply of minerals that can be used in several vaccines."

"This spring you found," said Benny, "was it a small dark pool surrounded by flowers?"

"No, this is a bright crystalline spring deep in the mountains. What's this all about, Mr. Benedek?" The voice faded and came back on the line. "Mr. Benedek? Are you still there?"

"I'm still here." Jon, what am I going to do now? "It's a long story, professor. I'll fill you in later. Thanks for calling, and good luck with your research." Professor Kirby thanked him, and

Benny hung up, disheartened.

Jonathan looked up from his cereal. "Was that Daddy?"

"No," said Benny. "Fraid not."

"You said they'd both be back soon."

"They will, they will. What's the matter, sport? Getting' tired of your old pal Benny?"

Jonathan's look was apologetic. "I really miss them."

"Uh-oh," said Shelley, seeing the dark eyes fill with tears. "Now, Jonathan, you know Benny and I will look after you."

Benny snapped his fingers. "I've got something that'll cheer you up." He was back in a moment with the toy he'd purchased the day before. "Glad I saved it for an emergency. How about this?"

Jonathan's face lit up as Benny put the train in his hands. "Is this for me?" he asked as if hardly daring to believe his good fortune.

"All yours, Jonny. Have a ball."

Eyes shining, Jonathan held the toy train, rubbing its shiny surface gently.

"That was Professor Kirby on the phone," Benny told Shelley. "The guy who started all this trouble. He doesn't know anything about a fountain of youth. I don't know what's going on around here."

Shelley pursed her lips thoughtfully as she examined a flask of green liquid. "I've got one more test to run, Benny, but it doesn't look good."

"What do you mean?"

She blew a bubble. "It still looks like just plain water."

Jonathan had taken his train to the living room and was carefully rolling the toy back and forth on the carpet. Benny wandered in. "I knew that would do the trick." He sat down facing Jonathan. "You know, you were some kid, J.J. I was always on the move, scrambling around, getting' into everything. You do whatever you're told. It's amazing. 'Course it's lucky for me. I'm not really into this father stuff. And if you'd been any younger, I'm not sure this would be so interesting."

"Toot, toot," said Jonathan, steering th train along the bone highway.

Benny sighed. "This is real cute, pal, but it's getting old, and I wish you were. I mean, if you were sixteen, at least we could go cruising." He glanced toward the kitchen. "Any time, Shelley. Any time."

There was a strident ringing of the doorbell, and Dr. Moorhouse sailed in, ready, Benny noticed, for battle. She softened considerably, however, when Jonathan greeted her with delight and showed her his train.

"Look what Benny gave me."

She cast a quick look in Benny's direction he could not interpret. "That's very nice, Jonathan. I hope you've had some breakfast."

He nodded. "This morning I climbed a tree and saved a cat."

"Oo, Jon, we were going to soft pedal the cat episode," Benny said.

Dr. Moorhouse fixed him with a steely gaze. "Climbed a tree?"

"Just a little tree. A bush. A shrub."

"I was way up," Jonathan corrected. "Way up. Benny helped me down."

"I'm sure he did," she said grimly. She turned to Benny, preparing to deliver a scathing lecture. At this moment, Shelley came in, holding a green flask. There was a blue smudge on her cheek, and for once, her jaws weren't chomping.

"Got it?" Benny asked hopefully.

Shelley shook her head sadly. "I'm sorry, Benny. It's just water."

"It can't be!" he exclaimed.

"I've run every test I know, plus some of my own devising. There are a few different minerals, but I checked them all, and all of them are commonly found in Caribbean water sources."

"Just water," Benny repeated, baffled. "Then why does Jonathan think he's four years old?"

"I don't know, Benny," said Shelley. "Has he been sick lately, or maybe bumped his head on something?"

"He's always bumping his head on something," said Benny. "That's no help."

"That settles it," said Dr. Moorhouse. "He's going straight to the hospital."

"Hospital!" Jonathan said, alarmed. He clutched the train to his chest, eyes wide.

"Now, look, you scared him," Shelley said disapprovingly.

"I'm not going to hospital," Jonathan said. "It hurts."

"It won't hurt this time," said Dr. Moorhouse. "We just want the doctors to have a look at you."

He shook his head emphatically.

"Maybe I should've let him fall out of that tree," said Benny.

"What?"

"He would've landed on his head. Looks like that's what it's gonna take." He was sorely disappointed that the water was not some magical formula for youth, but beginning to see a way to get Jonathan back to normal. "Look, I think I've got it. Jonathan hates snakes, and one gave him a pretty good scare. When he fell in the pool, he must've hit his head. All that, plus we'd been talkin' fountain of youth all day. Bound to be it. I've been wondering why he didn't shrink."

"Are you suggesting we get a snake?" Dr. Moorhouse asked in disbelief.

"Hey, if trauma works, let's use it."

"I absolutely refuse to let you scare this child," she said in that oddly controlled tone he'd heard the day before.

"I don't like snakes," said Jonathan. "Or hospitals."

Shelley patted his shoulder. "It's okay, Jonathan."

Dr. Moorhouse said, "I have had enough. I'll call Dr. Forester and have him come over here. He's an expert in these matters." She glared at Benny. "You may leave, and as for you, young lady," she transferred the glare to Shelley, "thank you for your assistance, but your services are no longer required. Get all of your things out of the kitchen as soon as possible."

"Hey, I know when I'm not wanted," said Shelley. Indicating Dr. Moorhouse, she said to Benny. "Leo. No question."

"Okay, okay, throw us out," Benny said, provoked. "You babysit for a while and see how you like it. Come on, Shelley, I'll help you pack."

Jonathan watched with wondering eyes. "Where are they going?"

"You don't need to concern yourself with that," Dr. Moorhouse told him.

There was a great deal of grumbling and crashing from the kitchen. Jonathan got up to investigate, but Dr. Moorhouse made him sit down.

"Just stay right here."

"What are they doing?" he wanted to know.

"They're leaving."

"Leaving? Where are they going? Can I go, too?"

"You are going to stay here with me," she said.

Benny and Shelley stormed through the living room, heading for the front door. Alarmed, Jonathan ran after them.

"Benny, Shelley, where are you going?"

"We're leaving and we're never coming back," said Shelley. "Good-by."

Steeling himself to confront the shock on Jonathan's face, Benny said, "You're a rotten, lousy kid, and we never want to see you again, got that? You're so bad we can't stand you."

Jonathan winced at the sharp tone and stepped back, dumfounded. Benny had never seen such a look of complete despair, but he kept on, despite Dr. Moorhouse's horrified, "Stop it!"

"You're a bad boy, Jonathan, the worst. That's why your mom and dad left. They're never coming back, either. They're dead, dead and gone. You'll never see them again. You'll never see me, you'll never see Shelley. All you've got left is Aunt Juli, and she's taking you to the hospital. She's going to leave you there."

"No," said Jonathan, shaking his head. "No."

"Benedek, stop it!" Dr. Moorhouse warned, appalled.

"And when we leave, ghosts will come," Benny said relentlessly. "Big, red-eyed ghosts with fangs. Every night, ghosts will try to get you when it's late and dark. And they will get you. They'll eat you!"

Jonathan gave a choked cry and ran off.

"Benedek, how could you?" Dr. Moorhouse said, amazed by his performance.

"It wasn't easy," he admitted. There was a stumbling crash from somewhere in the house. "Jonny, you are so predictable," he said, relieved.

Jonathan was lying at the foot of the stairs. Benny bent down and carefully touched his head. "Come on now, Jonathan. Let's see if that was enough."

Shelley came running up with a wet dishcloth. "Were we too mean?" She smoothed the cloth gently on Jonathan's forehead.

"I guess we'll find out in a minute," said Benny, seeing Jonathan's eyelashes flutter. "Jonathan? Come on, pal. Back to the future."

The dark eyes opened and refocused on his face. "There was a snake," Jonathan said, confused.

"He's gone, Jack. Can you sit up?" From Jonathan's expression, Benny couldn't quite tell if his friend was back.

Slowly Jonathan sat up, holding the cloth to his aching head. There was Dr. Moorhouse, her face intent, and an odd-looking girl with hair like a dandelion gone to seed. "What are we doing in my house?" he asked, bewildered. He was startled when they burst into cheers and shouts of joy. "Benedek, what's going on?"

"You're never gonna believe this one," said Benny, clapping him on the shoulder. "How do you feel? You okay?" There was a new alertness to Jonathan's eyes, a subtle but welcome change in his aspect.

"I'm fine," he said, looking around. "I thought we were in St. Arbor. There was a pool, and you started to drink some water." A look of dismay crossed his face. "Oh, don't tell me I've been running around the neighborhood playing Robin Hood again."

"No, no, better than that," Benny chortled. "You've been playing Romper Room. Have I got the inside story on you!"

"Benedek, please." He started up, swayed, and found the young girl under his arm.

"Take it easy," she cautioned. "You must have tripped trying to run up the stairs."

"Why would I be running up the stairs. Miss -um?"

"This is Shelley," Benny introduced. "She's one of Theo's trainees. She's been helping analyze the water."

"If Theo's involved in this, I know I don't want to hear it," said Jonathan. "What water?"

"The fountain of youth water," said Shelley, "only it turned out to be just plain water."

"I told you!" Jonathan snapped at Benny. Then he groaned. "Oh, my head. Can we all go sit down somewhere?"

Dr. Moorhouse gave Benny a hard meaningful look. "Benedek was just leaving."

"Yeah, I gotta go," said Benny. "Big deadline."

"What about Professor Kirby?" Jonathan asked as they assisted him to the living room. "Did we find him?"

"He's fine," said Benny. "No sweat. The case is closed, chum. Catch you later."

"Where's he going?" Jonathan asked.

"Never mind," said Dr. Moorhouse. "Sit down and rest."

Jonathan obeyed, feeling slightly dizzy. It wasn't like Benedek to rush off without giving him a full report, complete with colorful and highly exaggerated details, especially if he, Jonathan, had been doing something foolish or out of character. He was baffled to find himself not in the lush forest of St. Arbor, but in his house in an old pair of trousers, his shirt tail hanging out, no tie, no shoes, in the middle of the morning when he should have been teaching Early Civilizations. Dr. Moorhouse was gazing at him critically and, he felt, somewhat sympathetically, and this fluffy-headed teenager was offering him some aspirin and a glass of water.

"Thank you," he said. Then he frowned. "What are my specimens doing on the floor?"

"You were playing with them," the girl explained. "That's your train, too. Benny bought it for you."

As Jonathan stared at her in disbelief, Dr. Moorhouse said Sternly, "I believe you had something else to do, young lady."

"Guess so," said Shelley. She leaned over and gave Jonathan a kiss on the cheek. "You were a real good boy, Jonathan, honest. See you."

Jonathan cast Dr. Moorhouse a look of entreaty. "Dr. Moorhouse, I would really appreciate knowing what's happened."

"Just an accident," she said. "You must have hit your head when you fell into that pool. You thought you were four years old."

"Four?" he exclaimed. "How long have I been four?"

"Three days," she said.

"My God! And Benedek's not here to gloat? He must have had a field day!"

"Benedek has gone back to his disreputable rag, and that's where he's going to stay," Dr. Moorhouse informed him. "I've had quite enough of his ridiculous pranks. From now on, you will handle your assignments alone. I shall see to it."

"What do you mean, slone? You don't want Benedek to help me?"

"Help you! He'll help you into an early grave! This was absolutely the last straw, MacKensie."

"Yes, but he didn't push me into that pool, for heaven's sake," Jonathan protested. "He must have—my goodness—he must have gotten me home somehow." He wondered how his four year old self might have behaved. Benedek would have had a lot of fun at his expense, but there was no denying the man had kept him out of danger, or he wouldn't be sitting here now. "I'll call him," he said, reaching for the phone. "He has some explaining to do."

Her hand on his stopped him. "You will not. I forbid it. Your association with Edgar Benedek is finished, do you hear me? Finished." As Jonathan stared at her with an expression highly reminiscent of a four year old's amazement, she said, "He is not to set foot in this house or on the Georgetown campus, do you understand?"

"Dr. Moorhouse--"

"Don't argue with me, MacKensie. You're to rest and be at work on time in the morning."

With this abrupt order, she stalked out. Jonathan watched her go, wondering what had brought about such a drastic reaction. He knew she barely tolerated Benedek, but she had never expressed such hostility. His gaze traveled to the toy train. He looked at it for a long time. What had gone on here?

After a while, his headache was gone, and he felt surprisingly good, almost as if he'd taken a long restful vacation. In the kitchen, he found milk and several boxes of sugar-coated breakfast cereals, peanut butter, jelly, and white bread, plus a package of purple bubble gum. There were several folded pieces of paper on the table and a rock. He stared at all of this, trying to imagine what he must have been like and feeling increasingly mortified. He'd been a good child, hadn't he? Fairly quiet? His parents had always said so. He hoped so, for Benedek's sake, and that girl's, Shelley, Theo's little helper. Good lord, it's a wonder I'm back, he thought. Speaking of that, how did I get back?

He expected Benedek to call him that night and tell him all the stupid things he'd done, but there was no call. Jonathan slept well and felt rested and alert. No cheery wake up call from Benedek, though, and no enigmatic note taped to his office door.

After his morning class, he stopped by Dr. Moorhouse's office, but found her as tight-lipped and unresponsive as before.

"Dr. Moorhouse, about Benedek--"

"I don't want to hear that name! Out!"

"She's certainly in a choice mood today," he remarked to Liz, stopping by the secretary's desk. "I've never seen her so inflexible. I must have been an incredible nuisance. Trouble is, I can't remember a thing."

"I think she's been worried about you," said Liz.

"About me? Well, apparently, I've been blissfully ignorant the past three days, playing on the floor and eating Animal Bits."

Liz chuckled. "Second childhood, hm?"

"Have you seen Benedek? Has he been snooping around here, by any chance?"

"He's no longer welcome at this institution."

"Yes, I know, but I thought he might have just stopped by?"

"No, and he's not likely to. She gave him his marching orders."

"But why?" Jonathan asked. "He's done crazy things before. I don't understand why this upset her so. I'm perfectly all right. In fact, I feel better than I have for days."

Liz tapped her pen thoughtfully on her chin. "Well, I'm not sure, Jonathan, but I think it may have something to do with the fact that both her children died young."

"What?" He put down his load of books. "I didn't know that."

"Two boys. One died at six months, and the other was about three or four, I think."

"Three or four," he repeated, half to himself.

"Now, this isn't something that's common knowledge, so I'd appreciate it if you'd keep it to yourself."

"Of course. I understand." He glanced back at Dr. Moorhouse's closed door. "Let me leave these things here a moment, Liz." He tapped on the door and entered. Dr. Moorhouse was busy with some papers on her desk. She didn't look up.

"Are you still here, MacKensie?"

"Yes, I--"

"If it's about Edgar Benedek, I refuse to listen."

"Dr. Moorhouse, if you'd just hear me out. Believe me, the last thing I expected to be doing is defending Benedek, but in this case, he was really quite helpful."

"How do you know?"

"He got me home, didn't he? And he got me back. Was I—was I that bad?"

His anxious tone made her look up. "You were a very reasonable child, MacKensie. I simply do not approve of Benedek's methods."

Jonathan attempted a smile. "Benedek never does anything in a normal fashion." Seeing this didn't work, he continued, "Dr. Moorhouse, I'll admit he causes a great deal of trouble, but he has been useful on several of these assignments. He may not be the perfect partner, but, well, I've gotten used to him."

"I don't wish to discuss this any further," she said, busy with her papers once more.

Jonathan cleared his throat. "Then I don't see how I can continue as head of the Paranormal Research Department."

Up came her head. "Are you threatening me, MacKensie?"

Jonathan's voice cut off, then returned. "Yes, I suppose I am." There was a tense, uncomfortable silence. Then he said hesitantly, "I'm all right. Really. Never felt better."

Her expression was unreadable. "Yes. So you are." Another moment of silence, and then she said, "Just keep him out of my sight."

"Benedek? Are you there?"

"Yo, Jonny, what's the scoop? Can you come out and play?"

"It was just a little misunderstanding. Apparently, Dr. Moorhouse doesn't fancy you as a foster parent. Are you going to tell me what happened? It isn't like you to be so reticent."

"Tell you what, chum. Let me pick up Shelley and we'll all go roller skating. We'll give

you all the lurid details in stereo.”

“Roller skating? What is this, a test? I don’t know how to roller skate!”

“Ah, come on, Jon-boy! You’re bound to feel better after your thirty year time out. Give it a whirl. Get it? A whirl?”

“I just want to know what happened! Was I a lot of trouble?”

“Trouble? Nahh! Aside from chasing cats and climbing trees, no problem. I’ll be by your place in ten minutes.”

“Chasing c—Benedek! Benedek, don’t hang up, you jerk!”

Benny turned to Theo and gave him a thumb’s up sign. “Everything’s back to normal, Theo.”

Theo kept his eyes on his latest experiment. “That’s good, Benny.”

Benny kept his hand on the receiver a moment, smiling. Way to go, Pisces. “You got any metal strips I can put on my skates, Theo? I wanna make some sparks fly.”