

Chapter 2: The Cage

Everyone lives in a cage. Sometimes the cage is made by others, but mostly we live in cages built by ourselves. The walls are formed by the limits of our imaginations.

—Rufus Flycatcher

Ben's mom and dad never mentioned the pet again. Still Ben did his best to show that he could be "responsible."

Every afternoon he cleaned his room when he got home from school. He pushed the vacuum cleaner over the floor so much that he sucked fibers out of the carpet. Thus his room became an island of neatness in a sea of chaos, and his mother worried about his strange behavior so much that she went so far as to think about calling a psychiatrist.

But of course, like everything else, she put it off.

After cleaning, Ben practiced karate and did homework. When he ran out of homework, he made up math problems and solved them. He wrote essays on how to take

care of pets he'd like to own—from anteaters to a T-Rex.

He did so much homework that at the end of a week his teachers sent angry notes to his parents. “Don’t you think I have better things to do than correct papers all night?” bleated his English teacher, Mrs. Lamb. “Give me a break!” grunted his history teacher, Mr. Hogg. “Get a life!” howled his math teacher, Mrs. Vixen.

But no matter how much homework Ben did, he couldn’t impress his parents.

So a week before his birthday, he came home with a plan: “Mom,” he said, “this kid from school, Hakim, is going to New York for a couple of weeks, and he said that he’d pay me ten dollars if I’d take care of his lizard. Can I baby-sit his lizard?”

His mother grew suspicious. Ten dollars seemed like a fortune just for taking care of a lizard. She knew that you should never trust a deal that sounds too good to be true. “Well, do you know how to take care of it?”

“Hakim said it’s easy. The lizard hardly eats a thing. He wrote directions!” Ben handed the note to his mom. Hakim was in fifth grade, so he’d written in cursive, which Ben had a hard time with. And everything that Hakim wrote looked suspiciously like Arabic. Ben couldn’t figure out what the squiggly marks meant.

As his mother read, her face paled and her hand began to tremble. She asked, “Can you handle this?”

“You bet!” Ben said. What better way was there to prove that he could take care of a pet than to do it!

So that night, Hakim brought the lizard. It was a Nile monitor, nearly black with sandy yellow stripes on its tail, and gorgeous yellow spots on its legs and back. At nearly three feet long, it was a monster!

#

For her first few weeks, the thirteenth mouse lay weak and scrawny. Her pink skin had no hair, and she shivered most of the time. Being born blind, she could not see where to find food, and her larger brothers and sisters shoved her aside at feedings, so that she got almost nothing to eat.

She grew weaker and weaker, until she was too weary to move at all, or even to shiver. Barley Beard feared that she would die.

So he nuzzled up to her, pushing her tiny body with his nose so that he could urge her toward mother. The kitten was too weak to crawl.

Barley Beard whispered urgently, “Live, darned you. Live!”

And in a faint voice, the baby mouse asked, “Why? Dying . . . would be so much easier?”

“Because we need you,” Barley Beard said. “I need you. Your mother and brothers and sisters all need you.”

“What for?” the babe managed to ask.

Barley Beard wasn’t sure how to answer. “We live in a cage,” Barley Beard said at last. “The walls around us are invisible, but they are thick and real, and there is no getting past them.”

“Who holds us here?”

“Strange creatures called humans. They are like pinkies, like mice born without fur, except for a little on their heads.”

“Can’t you bite these pinkies?” the babe asked.

“The pinkies are enormous. They’re a hundred times taller than a mouse, and

thousand times fatter. We cannot fight them. We are powerless.”

“Why . . .” the baby mouse asked weakly. “Why do they want us here?”

“From time to time, the big pinkies take us from our prison. Some say that they love us, and when they take us, they ‘Embrace’ us—they usher us to their havens, where we are pampered and fed exotic foods. In the havens, the wood shavings are piled deep, and every mouse has a warm corner where he can lie down in his own nest. There are running wheels to play with, and other toys, and when you tire of them, the big pinky children preen you and cuddle and give you the love that you deserve.”

By now, the other mice had gathered around to listen. They circled Barley Beard and his ailing charge.

“It sounds wonderful,” one young mouse said, “Why would she want to save us from that?”

“Because,” Barely Beard said. “There is something better than being Embraced. There is something called freedom.”

He turned from the young mouse that had spoken, and studied the babe. She was small, blind, hairless, and too weak to move. “Once, long ago, another mouse came here a—wild mouse—who scurried under the Pet Shop door. He told about life beyond the cage, life away from the big pinkies, in a sunny place called the Endless Meadow. It lies just outside the Pet Shop, he said. It is a place that the Great Master of Field and Fen created just for mice. Food there grows untamed atop the tall grasses, and all you have to do is shake a hay stalk, and grain tumbles to the ground. There, you can drink sweet water from dewdrops that cling to the clover. There, he said, beautiful wildflowers tower overhead in a riot of color. Wild peas grow thick among the fields, and strawberries lie

fat on the vine, just waiting for you to nibble. There, he said, the sky fills with sunlight and rainbows by day, and twinkling stars and crescent moons by night.

“The Endless Meadow,” Barley Beard sighed. “I have never seen it, except in dreams. But that is our true home. That is our destiny. And if you will live, little mouse, you can lead us there.”

The baby mouse listened, but Barley Beard could not tell if she heard him. Her eyes were cloudy. Most likely, she was off in a dream, and she would slip in and out of it until she starved.

All day long and far into the night Barley Beard rested beside her, warming her with his own body, nuzzling her tummy so that he could stimulate it to hunger.

He prayed to the Great Master of Field and Fen, begging him to spare her. And at dawn his prayer was answered. A big pinky, a human woman that the mice called “The Feeder,” came to their pens, humming an ancient tune. She carried away six blind kittens.

“Hooray!” the kittens cried as Feeder lifted them. “We’re being Embraced. Goodbye. Have a good life!”

So the Pet Shop mice rejoiced for the young ones. And with them gone, the thirteenth mouse finally had a chance to get some food.

But the relief from hunger came too late, Barley Beard worried. The little one had starved too long. “She’s so thin and sickly,” he mused, “will she even be able to lift her head to eat?”

For though there was now space for her to drink, she was too far gone to crawl to her mother. That night, the young kitten lay as still as a corpse.

Several times in the darkness, Barley Beard felt her chest fall, and it did not rise again for a long time. He feared that she had stopped breathing altogether.

But at sunrise, she raised her head one last time, and began to struggle through the deep wood shavings to her mother's side.

"Go," Barley Beard urged her, tears flowing. "Go now, and feed." The other mice cheered, rallying her on, and the Thirteenth Mouse kicked until she reached her mother.

On that glorious morning she fed.

By the end of her first week, she began to grow. She looked different from other Pet Shop mice. She wasn't brownish-gray like her brothers and sisters. Instead, her coat came in with a slight yellow tint. Because of her strange color, her mother named her Amber.

And in three weeks, tiny Amber began to play with other Pet Shop mice.

Now, a week to a mouse is like a year to a human, so Amber grew quickly. By day, Barley Beard urge her to test her magical powers.

But as far as Barley Beard could tell, Amber had none. He begged her to wish for things to happen, but nothing did. He had Amber focus, tried to get her to cast spells by repeating rhymes. She tried waving her paws in special mystical gestures. She tried dancing until she entered a trance. But nothing worked. She couldn't shatter the walls of her cage, or grow wings and fly out.

Perhaps, he realized, she needs motivation. So he told her, "If ever you get outside the cage, you must take care. For monsters live in the Endless Meadow too, like things called snakes. They are simply a long gut with a mouth attached. They can slither

into your burrow and swallow you as you sleep. And there are hawks that can swoop out of blue skies and carry you to their nests—impaled on their sharp talons. And there are stoats—oh, wicked stoats—with bodies like wire that can twist and leap on you quicker than a blink.”

Amber’s mouth grew dry, and her heart hammered. “That sounds terrible.”

“Don’t worry,” Barley Beard tried to soothe her. “Just put your trust in the great Master of the Field and Fen. Sometimes it is our lot in life to become food for other creatures, but more often we are spared.”

Amber tried not to be alarmed, but old Barley Beard’s warning disturbed her. She sat for hours that night, snuggled in a corner, peering through the glass wall toward the fish tanks and the frog terrariums. She wondered what purpose her life really served. None that she could see.

On the shelf above her, the fancy spotted raced about in their elegant “mouse habitat,” exploring brightly colored tunnels. They often called out, “Wow, I found another yogurt chip in our gourmet feed. Too bad you brown mice don’t get any.” Then the other spotted mice would laugh, “tee, hee, hee,” and shout down to the brown mice, “Say, why don’t you get out of your cage and come up to play on our exercise wheel! It’s da bomb!”

What will I ever do? Amber wondered. Is this all that there is to life, burrowing in my wood shavings, trying to find a place to sleep where there isn’t too much poop?

She wanted to be special, more special than a spotted mouse. She wanted to believe old Barley Beard. But it was clear to her that she had no magical powers. She couldn’t free herself, much less, the rest of mouse-kind.

#

But that morning, Amber's mother was Embraced, lifted from the cage into the arms of the big pinky known as "The Feeder." Barley Beard was taken a day later.

By then, all of Amber's brothers and sisters had gone, and though there were still plenty of Pet Shop mice in the cage, Amber felt uprooted, completely alone.

She longed to be free of her dull surroundings, and only hoped to be Embraced.

#

All week long, Ben coddled the monitor lizard. He took baths with it and found that the lizard, whose name was Imhotep, loved to dive and thrash his tail. Then Ben would take Imhotep out, dry him with a blow dryer, and they would watch cartoons beneath a special lizard lamp.

Ben made sure that Imhotep got plenty of water to drink, and kept him warm.

And late in the afternoon on Ben's birthday, March twenty-sixth, Mona told him, "Hop in the car. We're going to the pet shop."

Though Noah's Ark Pet Shop was only three miles from his home, this was the first time that Ben had ever been allowed to go inside. He immediately felt drawn to the hedgehogs that rooted in their sawdust, merrily grunting.

But his mother marched him to the back of the store, handed him a dollar, and said, "Ugh, pick a mouse!"

"Which one?" Ben asked.

"Any mouse!" Mona said. "Just buy it, and put it in a bag. I don't want to see the horrible thing." She sneezed and covered her nose. "I've got to get away from these cats before I choke." She took off running.

“A mouse,” Ben whispered. “I never thought of getting a mouse!”

But it made sense. Dad had said that if he showed that he could be responsible, he could get a small pet. And what was smaller than a mouse?

He imagined what fun he could have. He could hold it, and pet it, and carry it to school in his lunchbox. He’d let it run around the room while he did homework.

It wouldn’t eat much, and no one was allergic to mice. A mouse could be a wonderful pet!

Ben peered into the cage. Dozens of fine mice burrowed in the wood shavings, drank at the feeder, or raced around playing tag.

They were plain brown with beady black eyes. A cage nearby had white mice with brown spots, but they were two dollars each. Ben didn’t have enough money for a fancy mouse. The ones he looked at were only fifty cents.

He finally noticed one mouse that was different, the smallest of the lot, sitting in the shavings. It had a yellow tinge to its fur, and it folded its paws across its belly. It peered right into Ben’s eyes, as if it had been waiting all of its life for Ben to appear.

“May I help you?” a clerk asked, stepping up behind.

“Yes,” Ben said. “I want the little one!”

#

“I’ll name it Amber,” Ben said in the car. He sat in the back seat, with his mouse in its sack. It peered up at him as he petted it with one finger. The mouse sniffed at him, its little whiskers pulling back. Ben didn’t know where he got the name Amber. It had just popped into his head.

“I wouldn’t get too attached,” Mona said as she drove.

“What do you think it eats?” Ben asked. “Would it like pickles? Do we have any pickles in the fridge?”

Mona just kept driving.

“Do you think it’s a boy, or a girl?” Ben asked.

“I don’t think it matters,” Mona said. “Just keep it in the sack!”

Ben sneaked his mouse out. His mouse, his first pet. It climbed up the front of his shirt. It perched in a fold of cloth on his chest and closed its eyes. Ben kissed it.

“Did you just kiss that mouse?” Mona asked, peering at him through the rear-view mirror.

“No,” Ben lied.

“Never kiss a mouse,” Mona said. “They’re like rats, like midget rats. The dirty things carry disease.”

“What kinds?” Ben asked, suddenly worried.

“Like the Poopopolous virus and the Black Plague! Now put it back in the sack!”

Ben frowned. He picked up his mouse and hid it in his cupped hand. It didn’t look dirty or sick. It just sat with its eyes closed, sleeping. He held still, afraid that the mouse might wake if he moved. Amber rode without making a sound until they got home.

When the car stopped, Ben rushed to the living room, where dad was watching Samurai Jack. “Dad, look!” Ben called. “I got a mouse, a real mouse. Its name is Amber!”

Dad leaned forward in his chair, eyes on the t.v. “Fine,” he said in an annoyed tone. “Now march upstairs and feed it to the lizard.”

Ben's stomach sank. "Why? What do you mean?"

"You read Hakim's note," dad said. "You have to feed the lizard once a week."

It seemed to Ben that the heavens opened then, and pure knowledge coursed through him. Hakim had said that his lizard didn't eat much, but it had to eat something. Of course! Mice. It ate mice!

Ben had never felt so awful. He got sick to his stomach, and the room seemed to sway.

Dad commanded, "Just drop the mouse in the cage. The lizard knows what to do."

"No," Ben pleaded in a small voice. "Please. I . . . can't."

His dad gave him a hard look. "Ben," he said. "You agreed. Imhotep is your responsibility."

"But dad—"

"Butts," dad rumbled in his sternest tone, "are for spanking." He pierced Ben with his steely eyes. "Now be a good Marine."

Mona spoke up. "Look, if you go feed this mouse to Imhotep, maybe we'll get one for you next week."

His dad gave Mona a sharp look. They hadn't talked about this.

"Really?" Ben asked. "Can I get my own mouse?"

Dad grew angry, but said, "Maybe."

"What if, what if I keep this one?" Ben asked. "I'll pay you for it with my own allowance." Ben's mom was really lousy at paying allowance. She would put it off and put it off, until she owed Ben a small fortune. He figured that right now he had about

fifty dollars in back allowance owed to him. “We could go back down to the pet shop and get another mouse,” he said eagerly. “That way, I could keep Amber.”

Dad bayoneted him with a stare. “The pet shop is closed now; the lizard is hungry. Do your duty, soldier.”

Ben faltered. Dad never called him “soldier” unless he was in deep trouble.

Ben’s heart sank. He tried one last desperate plea. “Couldn’t we just feed it . . . Spam, or something?”

Mona looked up at him and said in a sad voice, as if Ben stupid, “Honey, no one—human or animal—should be forced to eat Spam. That’s just too cruel.”

Caught between his father’s threats and his mother’s promise, Ben didn’t have a choice.

Cupping Amber in his hand, Ben marched upstairs, lumbering up each step, painfully.

As he reached the top, his heart pounded in his ears. He wondered if he dared fake it. Maybe he could hide the mouse under his bed, and pretend that he’d fed the lizard?

No, he decided, that would be too dangerous. The lizard might get hungry and die.

He opened his bedroom door.

The beautiful Nile monitor stood regally in his cage, front paws on his sunning log. Imhotep flicked his dark tongue and eyed Ben expectantly. It was as if he’d been waiting for this moment.

Maybe I could give him some candy, Ben thought. He still had some

marshmallow chickens in his drawer, leftover from Easter. But that wouldn't do, Ben knew. The lizard ate mice. Candy might make it sick.

Amber huddled in Ben's palm, fast asleep. "I'm sorry," Ben told her. "I'm so sorry."

Amber half woke. The mouse sniffed the air.

Ben couldn't think of anything else to do. He carried Amber to the lizard's cage, and slid the screen lid partway open. He took Amber by the tail and lifted her gently.

"Goodbye, Amber," Ben said with quavering lips.

Amber woke. Her dark eyes peered at the lizard. She began squeaking fearfully and wiggled from side to side, swaying as she tried to escape.

The mouse's terror riveted the lizard.

Imhotep flicked his forked tongue, tasting the air, and stood eagerly with head raised, ready to pounce.

Then something strange happened.

The mouse shrieked louder and louder, until the whole room echoed with its cries.

Ben heard a rumbling sound, like thunder. A blinding blue light flashed.

In an instant, everything changed. Ben shrank out of his clothes, or else his shirt suddenly grew as large as a circus tent. At the same time, something yanked his nose and ears, and pinched the skin at the top of his butt—stretching him in impossible directions.

His thumbs shrank to nothing, and his front teeth grew enormous.

Tears of pain blinded Ben.

The mouse was screaming. Screaming.

Ben let out a high shriek.

Amber's tail grew huge. One second, Ben held it between two fingers. The next he could hardly hold it all.

He fell with Amber, headfirst, and landed, splat!—right into the deep sand by the lizard's water dish.

Ben blinked. He was no larger than Amber, who sprawled next to him. The glass walls of the cage rose like cliffs around them.

The lizard Imhotep towered above him, too. Ben suddenly knew what it would be like to stare into the face of a hungry dinosaur.

“Allah be praised,” the lizard said, flicking his tongue. “I love eating American. Now, if I only had some fava beans and a nice Chianti!”