

Of Mice and Magic

By

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Chapter 1: Minor Miracles

Miracles occur right under our snouts every day. We just don't look closely enough to see them.

—Rufus Flycatcher

Benjamin Ravenspell's mother liked to put things off. She never paid her taxes until the tax agents came to the door. She could go months without mopping. And she never bothered to cook dinner—period. Instead, she'd just waste away until her hunger drove her to throw Ben in the car and race to the nearest fast-food restaurant.

Which is how nine-year-old Ben Ravenspell found himself eating at McDonald's at midnight on Christmas Eve.

The speaker overhead played "Silent Night" as Ben's mom scarfed down Chicken McNuggets and asked, "So, honey, what would you like Santa to bring you tomorrow?"

Finally, Ben thought. He'd been waiting weeks for her to ask that question, but

she had put it off, and put it off, as usual.

“Mmmph.” Ben tried to clear a french fry from his throat. “I want a pet!”

His mom’s eyes widened in surprise, and her face went as red as a pomegranate. She coughed up a McNugget. It arced over the table and plopped onto some bald guy’s neck. The fellow grabbed it, eyed it suspiciously, and then plopped it in his mouth as if it were manna from heaven.

“But, but,” she sputtered, “I thought you wanted a baby brother!”

Ben thought back. He had wanted one last year on his birthday, but that was forever ago.

“Not anymore,” Ben said.

“What if it’s too late to change your mind?” his mom shouted, growing hysterical.

Ben knew that he wouldn’t get a pet for Christmas. His mom probably already had a baby hidden in her closet. All she’d have to do is wrap it in gold paper and shove it under the tree.

Ben explained, “Colton, who lives down the street, asked for a baby brother—and the doctor gave him a sister! All she does is stink up diapers and suck on stuff. She leaves a slime trail wherever she goes. The kids call her the ‘Rug Slug.’”

“O-kaaay,” Mona said, as if trying to think of some way to change his mind.

“What kind of pet would you like? You know that I’m allergic to cats and dogs.”

Ben thought. “Could I get a mammoth?”

“Mammoths are just pretend, Hon.”

“Well, I want something cool. I want a pet that I can play with, and talk to, one

that will be my friend. . . .”

“We’ll have to think about that,” Mona said, which was her way of putting him off.

As he tried to sleep that night, Ben heard his mom and dad downstairs under the Christmas tree. Ben always took a football helmet and baseball bat to bed, just in case a monster invaded his closet. So he took off his football helmet, laid his baseball bat by his bed, and sneaked to the top of the stairs.

“What are we going to do?” Mona asked dad. “We’ve tried for a baby for months. Now he’s changed his mind!”

“I’m glad he changed his mind,” Dad said. “If we had a baby tomorrow, he’d get bored with it in a week—and we’d be stuck with another kid!”

Ben inched to the landing and peered through the banister rails. Mom and dad knelt under the Christmas tree. Mona never took the tree down. It had been sitting in the corner since last year, and had gathered so much dust it looked as if it was covered in gray snow. Cobwebs seemed to be holding it upright.

“Ben needs a friend,” Mona said. “Ever since Christian . . . , he’s been . . . lost.”

Ben felt a pang. Christian had been his best friend. Then Christian’s dad got a job at a penguin cannery in Antarctica, and the whole family moved away.

“What’s he need friends for?” dad asked. “I never had any, and I turned out all right!”

“I had a friend, once,” Mona said. “You have to have a friend to learn how to be a friend.”

“He’ll never have a friend,” dad objected. “At his age, there are only two kinds of

kids: jocks and the nerds. Ben isn't either."

"He's a jock, definitely," Mona said. "He's almost got his black belt in karate."

"He's a wimp," dad objected. "You can only be a real jock if your knuckles drag the ground. Besides, he reads books, for heaven's sake! What kind of weird kid reads books?"

Dad was right, Ben thought. Most kids specialize in something. You could only be a friend with a jock like Spencer Grimes if you could hawk boogers across the playground; and you could only be friends with a nerd like T.J Piddly if you had all gazillion Yu-Gi-Oh cards.

But Christian had been the kind of friend you could jump puddles with, or explore sewers with, or just talk to. Friends like that are hard to find.

"Ben needs to learn how to get by without friends," dad concluded. "Maybe if we could make him grow up faster, get through this awkward phase. Maybe we could try steroids. In a couple of years, we could turn that runt into a grunt. He'll make plenty of friends when he joins the marines!"

"You know," Mona said, "Ben has a birthday coming up in a couple of months. . . ."

"Well," dad said, "He's not ready for a pet. He'd have to feed it, clean its cage. Any kid who doesn't keep his room clean, isn't ready to have a pet."

Humph, Ben thought. By dad's way of thinking, mom would never be ready to have a kid!

The truth was, Ben didn't have any friends because his mom never cleaned the house. At school they said that it was so dirty that you had to wipe your shoes after you

left. They called it The Roach Hotel. No one ever wanted to come over, and Ben figured that if he got any less popular, even his imaginary friends would start avoiding him.

“All right,” Mona said. “We’ll tell him tomorrow. If Ben can prove that he can be responsible, we’ll take him to the Noah’s Ark and let him pick out a pet.”

“What kind,” dad asked, “a guppy or a gorilla?”

“A small pet,” Mona said.

So Ben went to bed, and in his dreams, a talking rabbit took him fishing for perch on the Long Tom River. The perch lay big and purple under the water, like bruises, burping.

A duck with a dozen chicks swam by, warning her young, “Be careful, those hooks can put out your eye.”

When Ben tried to put a worm on his hook, it wriggled away crying, “Why can’t I be your pet? I’m not as slimy as a little sister!”

And if darker dreams disturbed his slumber, Ben did not recall them in the morning.

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Ben’s mom and dad didn’t talk to him about the pet on Christmas morning, but Ben thought about it all the time. He cleaned his room that day, and when mom took him to town later that week, he stopped at Noah’s Ark and peered through the windows at the hamsters.

He tried very hard to start growing, so that his dad would like him better, and he only read in secret. In an effort to make some friends, he tried smiling and being friendly, even to the weirdest kids at school, but no one wanted to be his friend.

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On the thirteenth night, of the thirteenth month, of the new millennium, Ben sensed a change. He could feel it in the wind, and wondered at it even as he dressed for bed. Something was different. He could almost smell . . . magic in the air.

All day long snow had fallen, lazy flakes drifting into heaps, settling between the fir trees in his backyard. Then the clouds fled and stars simmered in the sky, casting a web of silvery light on the snow, while the moon sprung up as orange as a pumpkin.

The neighbors still had their Christmas lights on, winking from the eaves. And in the backyard, a snowman leaned over, almost as if it bent to pick up the carrot nose that had fallen from its face.

Suddenly a light streaked overhead, a flaming yellow ball that struck Bald Hill, exploding in a blaze of glory.

“Look, a star fell!” Ben told Mona, who was staring in awe at the clean sheets that Ben had starched and ironed and put on his bed that morning.

“Make a wish,” Mona said.

Ben’s heart hammered. He let his mind drift, as if seeking across the world to connect to the object of his desire. Then he whispered, “I wish I had a pet—uh, I mean a friend? I mean a friendly pet.”

He put on the football helmet that he kept by his nightstand, grabbed his baseball bat, and jumped into bed.

“You know,” Mona said. “Other children sleep with teddy bears to help them feel safe.”

“Don’t be silly,” Ben said. “If a robber broke in, hitting him with a teddy bear

wouldn't help. Would it?"

"I suppose not." Mona sighed. It was an old argument. Ben had slept with his bat and helmet for years. "I guess that I should be grateful that you don't want to keep swords in your bed."

He said his prayers, and Mona gave him a peck on the cheek, wished him "Goodnight," and slipped from his room.

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And outside, miracles occurred.

Thirteen minutes after the first star fell, another streaked through the sky to its left, at a perfect twenty-degree angle. And every thirteen minutes, another star fell, until thirteen had fallen in all, each aligned perfectly with the thirteen cardinal points on the compass—at least as cardinal points are understood by crows.

And in Dallas, Oregon, small wonders broke out everywhere, though no one—at least no humans—took notice.

Thirteen dazed children suddenly put aside their video games and rushed to do homework. Thirteen mutts began to howl so beautifully that the nuns at St. Mary's thought that it was a heavenly choir announcing the Second Coming. In Ben's backyard the snowman leaned over, picked up the carrot, screwed it onto his face, and trudged away.

While at Noah's Ark pet shop, the greatest wonder of all occurred. Beneath the pale lights thrown by the fish tanks that held the neon tetras, a mother mouse gave birth.

Twelve small, pink kittens she had in her nest, all with eyes closed. The other mice gathered in awe. Even the angelfish across the room gaped with eyes as bright as

gold coins.

The lights above the fish tanks flashed brightly, and their green glow came together to form something that lived and breathed. Thirteen luna moths appeared, circling above the mouse pen like a crown, pale green wings flapping in unison, graceful tails sweeping behind. The feeder crickets at the front counter began to fiddle beautifully as the thirteenth mouse made its way, squeaking and squirming, into the world.

As it dropped into the wood shavings, a wise old mouse named Barley Beard said reverently, “Thirteen, and the last is a girl—just as the prophets foretold. A thirteenth miracle on this night of miracles!”

“But grandfather,” a young mouse asked, “what’s so special about this mouse?”

Barley Beard said, “I only know that the number thirteen is normally unlucky, and in some ways this kit is destined to lead a dangerous life, for her enemies will seek to destroy her. Yet on this night of nights, all of the fortune in the world will flow into this child.”

“You mean she’ll be lucky?” the young one asked.

“More than lucky—” Barley Beard said, “she’ll be magic! Not since us small creatures ruled the earth has a mouse like this been born.” Barley Beard peered at the glass walls of his cage, longing to escape. He didn’t need to remind the young ones that to be born in a cage was hard indeed. No mouse of the field could be born to a more humble fate.

Barley Beard only hoped that the young kit would find a way to free them all.

A shadow darkened the window, and Barley Beard glanced outside. A snowman plodded past, dressed in a fine top-hat, twirling a cane.

Odd, Barley Beard thought, as he watched the man of snow waddle under the streetlight, ice crystals glittering like diamonds. But soon the snowman was gone. He trudged several blocks, until he found a snowgirl in a yard nearby. Then he cuddled against her, one arm wrapped over her shoulder, and waited for spring. Thus he passed from knowledge of the world of mice forever.