

4 Off the Wall

I told Jimmy Fargo about Princeton.

"You're moving?" he asked, like he couldn't believe it.

"Not exactly," I answered. "We're just going for a year."

"You're moving!" he said. "I can't believe it."

"Neither can I."

"You don't *have* to move," he said. "You could stay here if you really wanted to."

"You think I don't want to stay? I don't know anybody in Princeton. You think I want to go to some school where I don't have any friends?"

"Then tell your mother and father you refuse to go. That's what I'd do."

"But where would I live?"

"With me."

"But where would I sleep?"

"On the floor," Jimmy said. "It's good for your back to sleep on the floor."

I thought about sleeping on the floor for a year. And about living with Jimmy and his father. Mr. Fargo used to be an actor, but now he's a painter. He paints these weird-looking pictures of circles and triangles and squares. He's so absentminded that he only buys food when Jimmy reminds him. One time I looked in their refrigerator, and all they had was an empty bottle of wine, half an apple, and a salami and onion sandwich so old it had turned green.

"If you don't stay, I'm never going to talk to you again," Jimmy said. "I mean *never!*" He bent down and tied his shoelace. Jimmy's laces are always undone. "And I'm going to tell Sheila Tubman she can have your rock in the park," he added.

"You wouldn't!"

"Try me."

"Some friend you're turning out to be!"

"Same for you!" Jimmy turned and walked away, his hands stuffed deep into his pockets.

I thought of plenty more to say as soon as he was gone, but instead of running down the street after him, I went home.

"That's right."

"So I won't give Sheila your rock, after all."

"Thanks. She wouldn't know what to do with it anyway," I said.

"But I'm not going to use it until you come back."

"Okay. I won't use my Kreskin's Crystal until I get back, either."

"Deal!" Jimmy said.

And we shook on it.

The next morning when I was going down in the elevator with Turtle, Henry said, "I'm going to miss you and your family."

"Bet you won't miss Fudge," I said.

"Oh yes . . . even that little devil," Henry said. "I remember the day he got into my elevator and pushed all the buttons at once . . . jammed up the works for two hours." Henry laughed. He sounded like a sea lion. I always expect him to slap his arms together when he laughs. "And I'll miss that baby of yours, too. Won't get to see her grow up now."

"Sure you will," I told him. "We're only going for a year."

"That's what they all say," Henry muttered.

Outside, it was gray and humid. I wondered if the sun was shining in Princeton. As I walked Turtle

down the street, he sniffed here and there, trying to find a place he liked. I encouraged him to use the curb. *In Princeton he'll be able to go wherever he likes,* I thought. Maybe I won't even have to walk him. I'll just open the door and he'll run out into the yard. And I won't have to clean up after him, either.

Ever since New York City passed what I call the Doggie-Do law, walking Turtle hasn't been that much fun. At first, when I heard that every dog owner had to clean up after his own dog, I told Mom that I wouldn't be able to walk Turtle anymore.

Mom said, "That's too bad, Peter. Because if you don't walk him, who will?"

I was hoping Mom would volunteer. I was hoping she'd say, "I know how grossed out you feel at the idea of picking up Turtle's dog-do. . . ."

But she didn't. Instead she said, "Look, Peter . . . you're going to have to make a tough decision. If you want to keep Turtle, you're going to have to clean up after him. Otherwise, Daddy and I will try to find a nice farm somewhere in the country and . . ."

I didn't wait for her to finish. "Send Turtle to a farm?" I shouted. "Are you kidding? He's a city dog! He's *my* dog!"

"Well, then . . ." Mom said, smiling.

I got the point.

Mom bought me a contraption called a Pooper Scooper. It's a kind of shovel, attached to a Baggie, and when Turtle does his thing I scoop it up, get it into the Baggie, tie up the end, and toss it into the trash basket.

At first I made a mess of myself, trying to get it to work. But now I'm a regular expert. Still, it's pretty disgusting. Almost as disgusting as Tootsie's diapers. I wish I could train Turtle to use the toilet, especially in winter, when I stand around freezing while he takes his time, trying to make up his mind. I know it's not Turtle's fault. He can't help being a dog. And when he sleeps at the foot of my bed or licks my face, it's all worth it.

Just as Turtle was finishing, Sheila Tubman came skipping up the street. "I hear you're moving," she said.

I nodded, and scooped up his stuff.

"Good! I was afraid it was just a rumor. I can't wait until you're gone. Then I won't have to smell your yucky dog anymore."

"My dog is not yucky!" I yelled, tying up the poop bag.

"Did you ever smell him, Peter?"

"Yes, all the time."

"Well, I guess you don't notice because you smell

so much like him yourself." She started skipping away.

"Hey, Sheila . . ." I called.

"Yes?" She turned around.

"Stuff it!"

"Peter Hatcher, you are disgusting!"

"That's better than what you are," I called, enjoying myself.

"Oh yeah . . . what's that?" she asked.

"That's for me to know and you to find out."

"Ha ha, very funny," she said. "You and your yucky dog are both *very* funny!"

"*Sic her*, Turtle," I said. Turtle growled, then started barking, which *was* very funny, because he doesn't know what *sic her* means. But Sheila didn't know that *he* didn't know, so she started screaming and running toward our building. And when Turtle saw her go crazy like that, he took off after her, barking up a storm, thinking it was some kind of game. He pulled his leash right out of my hand, so I had to chase him, calling, "Turtle, Turtle . . . down boy," because he was already jumping up and down on Sheila, trying to lick her face.

Sheila kept right on screaming.

Finally Henry came out and asked, "What's going on here?" He pulled Turtle off Sheila and held him for

me. I picked up the end of his leash and patted his head.

"It's Peter Hatcher," Sheila said. "He told his dumb dog to *sic* me and he did!"

"He did not!" I said.

"He did too!"

"You don't even know what *sic* means," I said.

"I certainly do!"

"Oh yeah . . . what?" I asked.

"It means . . . it's like . . . like giving germs to a person," Sheila said. "The one he *sics* gets sick, too."

I started laughing. "Did you hear that, Henry? Did you hear what she said?"

"I heard," Henry said. "And I want you to keep your dog outside until he calms down." He turned to Sheila. "Come on, honey . . . I'll take you upstairs first."

"I'm so glad he's moving," Sheila sniffed. "I hope he never comes back. There should be a law . . ."

I laughed all the way to the corner. I think Turtle did too.

On the morning of the move, Mom woke me at six o'clock. I still had to pack my carton of special things. But first I wanted some juice. I'm always thirsty first thing in the morning. On my way to the kitchen I

passed Tootsie's crib. She was watching her mobile and gurgling away. She was also covered with trading stamps. They were stuck to her arms, her legs, her belly, and her face. She even had one on the top of her head, and one pasted to the bottom of each foot. "Hey, Mom . . ." I called.

"What is it?"

"It's Tootsie."

"But I just . . ."

I didn't wait for her to finish. "Hurry up, Mom!" I called. Mom raced in, buttoning up her skirt. "Oh no!" she said when she saw Tootsie. Then she shouted, "Fudge!"

"Hello, Mommy," Fudge said, crawling out from under Tootsie's crib. He was wearing his disguise—black eyeglass frames attached to a rubber nose, with a stick-on beard and moustache. He'd sent away for it months ago. It cost four cereal box tops, plus twenty-five cents.

"Did you do that to Tootsie?"

"Yes, Mommy." He was using his best-little-boy-in-the-world voice.

"Why?" Mom asked.

"Tootsie told me to." He climbed up the side of her crib and reached in, shaking Tootsie a little. "Didn't you tell me to, good girl, good little baby. . . ."

Tootsie said, "Aaaa . . ." and she kicked her legs up in the air.

"That was a very naughty thing to do!" Mom told Fudge. "And I am very angry at you."

Fudge kissed my mother's hand. "I love you, Mommy."

"That's not going to work today," Mom told him.

"I love you anyway," he said, kissing her other hand. "You're the best mommy in the whole world. Don't you love your little boy?"

"Yes, I love you," she said, "but I am still very angry at you. VERY!" And she smacked Fudge on his backside.

He pouted for a minute, about to cry, then changed his mind. "Didn't hurt," he said.

"You want one that will hurt?" Mom asked.

"No!"

"Then don't you ever do anything like that again. Do you understand?"

"Yes!"

"Hey, Mom," I said, "I thought you don't believe in violence."

"I don't, ordinarily," Mom said, "but sometimes I forget."

"Look . . . it's okay with me if you want to spank Fudge," I said. "Personally, I think a spanking a day would be good for him."

"No . . . no . . . no . . ." Fudge shouted, holding his rear end.

"Why'd you really do it?" I asked him.

"I want to trade her in for a two-wheeler, like yours," he told me.

"You can't trade her in," Mom said. "She's a person . . . she's not a book of stamps."

"She looks like a book of stamps," Fudge said.

Mom picked up Tootsie.

"Well, doesn't she?" Fudge asked again, and I could tell Mom was trying hard not to laugh.

"You know something, Fudge?" I said. "You're off the wall . . . you are *really* off the wall."

"Off the wall . . . off the wall . . ." he sang, dancing around Mom and Tootsie. "Fudgie is off the wall!"

Tootsie laughed. Either that or she hiccuped. It's hard to tell the difference.

I followed Mom into the bathroom, where she set Tootsie in the sink.

"Two years of trading stamps, down the drain," I said.

"Good-bye stamps," Fudge called from the doorway. "Good-bye . . . good-bye . . ."

"I'm not going to save stamps anymore," Mom said. "I'm going to find a grocery store that gives away something else."

. . .

An hour later Dad came back with the U-Haul, and we loaded it and were on our way.

As soon as we were through the Lincoln Tunnel, Fudge started singing, "*M-a-i-n-e* spells *Princeton*."

"No, it doesn't stupid," I said. "It spells *Maine*."

"I know," Fudge said. "I'm just making up a song."

"Maybe you could make it up in your head," Dad suggested. "And sing it to us when we get to Princeton. Then it will be a surprise."

"A surprise," Fudge said. "I like surprises." He was quiet for a minute. Then he said, "You know what, Daddy? I'm off the wall."

"Who told you that?" Dad asked.

"Pee-tah. Didn't you?" he asked me.

"Yeah," I said. "I sure did. And you sure are."

"I'm off the wall," Fudge repeated. "Just like Pee-tah's map of the world." He rested his head against Mom's shoulder and I could hear him slurping away on his fingers. He was still wearing his disguise.