

# **Richard and the Vratch**

by Beatrice Gormley

To Lois and David,  
who grew up with me in vratch country

## **Contents**

1. The Call of the Wild
2. A Boy Needs a Dog
3. Buck
4. Hidden Animals
5. Spies
6. Lessons from a Dog
7. Buck Is Missing
8. Puppy Suits
9. The Surprise Exhibit
10. Looking for Dr. Mounce
11. Going to the Offense
12. Some Friend

## 1. The Call of the Wild

Dropping his many-bladed Swiss army knife into his jeans pocket, Richard hurried toward the back door. He thought he turned the doorknob quietly, but his mother called to him from the laundry room.

“Richard? If you’re going hiking, I’d like you to get someone to go with you. All right?”

Richard hesitated. He’d gotten into trouble yesterday when he came back from a long hike and his mother realized he had been exploring the hills above their house by himself. “Okay,” he called back. “Okay” didn’t necessarily mean, “Okay, I’ll do what you said.” “Okay” could just as well mean “Okay, I understand—you want me to get someone to go hiking with me. But be reasonable, Mom, Who could I get?”

As if she had heard his thought, Mrs. Hayes called, “Tony Heckman might like to go for a climb.”

Before he could hear any more helpful suggestions that were supposed to be taken as instructions, Richard stepped outside and closed the door. He glanced across the street to see if Tony Heckman was around, but the Heckmans’ cement driveway was blank. He looked up to the end of the street, from which Tony often swooped down on his bike at what seemed like seventy miles an hour. The street was empty. Good. In case his mother asked, Richard had looked for Tony Heckman.

Lifting his head, Richard gazed at the hills rearing into the sky. The Lagarto Grande hills, people called them, but Richard thought of them as mountains. When he had first caught sight of them, just before they moved here from Pleasant Acres, his scalp tingled. A phrase from a song came to him: “purple mountains’ majesty.”

*Click.*

The sound of a pebble hitting the end of his driveway made Richard turn. Across the street a boy Richard’s age, with dark shaggy hair and low-slung jeans, picked another pebble from his handful. He tossed it a little farther up Richard’s driveway. *Click—rattle.*

So far, Richard had avoided Tony because he reminded Richard of a boy in Pleasant Acres who had tried to pick fights with him. Mom didn’t seem to realize what kind of boy Tony was, though. She just wanted them to be friends because she was friendly with Mrs. Heckman, because Tony’s little sister went to the nursery school where Mom taught.

*Click—rattle.* Richard could see that Tony was trying to get his attention, but he pretended not to notice. Instead of walking up the short street to the end, as he has planned, and hiking up the dry creek bed in the canyon, Richard turned. Crossing his backyard, he walked along the ivy-covered chain-link fence to the side of the hill. It seemed more interesting to climb the fence, anyway, as if he were escaping. Digging the toes of his sneakers into the holes where the ivy, was thinnest, he vaulted the fence without even scratching his wrist.

As he scrambled up the bank of the crumbly, rusty-colored rock, Richard grasped a sage bush to pull himself up. The pungent sage smell came off on his hands, and he breathed it deeply into his lungs. Ahh. The adventure started here.

Back in Pleasant Acres, adventures did not happen. Pleasant Acres was nothing but rows and rows of new houses on tiny lots, each with its bright green doormat of a lawn and its skinny new tree tied to a stake. Richard rode his bike down flat street after flat street, looking for adventure,

but the best thing he had found was a new park with more scrawny, braced trees. Nothing hidden, nothing wild.

Part of Richard's ideas about adventure came from his favorite book, *The Call of the Wild*. With his Swiss Army knife in his pocket, Richard felt like the outdoorsman of the Klondike, John Thornton. "With a handful of salt and a rifle he could plunge into the wilderness and fare wherever he pleased." Inside his head, as if it were a tape deck, Richard played parts of the book.

His legs pumping steadily up the steep path, Richard brushed through dry, scrubby bushes. No one used this path, he was sure—no human beings, anyway. Last week, on this very spot, he had raised his head, panting from the climb, to see a deer.

The deer stood perfectly still for a moment, staring at Richard. *Is he dangerous?* The animal seemed to be asking itself. The deer's dusty brown coat blended into the sun-scorched grass and brush—if it had stopped a little farther away, Richard might not have seen it at all. Only its soft eyes moved. Then it bounded off the trail with a crackling of twigs, and it was gone.

A deer, a wild deer, living right here in the hills above his house! Not in a zoo, not even in a national park like Yosemite. No one had planned for the deer to be there so Richard could see it—it was just part of life here in Lagarto Grande. Who knew what might happen this afternoon?

At the top of the first rise Richard glanced back. From this height he could see that the houses on his street, Vista Drive, were set on terraced lots, rising like steps along both sides of the road. A purple car crawled up the street and into the driveway of the house below Richard's. That must be Mrs. VanNest, coming home from the newspaper, the Lagarto Grande *Grande View*, where she worked. The white snout of her overweight dog, Snowball, poked out of the car's back window.

Last week someone had stuck a cardboard sign, PRIZE PIG, on Snowball's doghouse. Pinned to the sign was a red ribbon: Second Prize, Pomona County Fair. Richard had heard Mrs. VanNest complaining to his mother about it. "Of course I know it wasn't Richard—it was that Heckman boy. Second prize!"

Richard turned back to the trail. "Plunge into the wilderness," he muttered. He knew, of course, that these sparsely covered hills, here at the edge of the desert in Southern California, didn't look anything like the country in Alaska where John Thornton roamed with his fierce dog, Buck.

The Boy Scout camp Richard had gone to last summer, in fir woods and meadows, had actually looked like John Thornton country. At summer camp, though, Richard could never go off by himself. That was the important thing—once he was up in these hills, he could do exactly what he wanted.

His eager-sharp eyes missed nothing, thought Richard as he noted the large, reddish bush tucked into a fold of the hill. Out of sight under the bush—a low tree, really—he could rest. He could also eat the provisions in his back pockets: peanut butter and crackers and an apple. He would cut the apple with one of the blades on his Swiss Army knife.

Panting and a little dizzy from the steep climb, Richard turned again to look down. Now he could see the whole valley: the spread of housing developments with their blue dots of swimming pools, the cluster of stories and gas stations along the main street of Lagarto Grande, and the green rectangles of the high school football field and the park. On the other side of town the freeway was hidden under a dirty fuzz of smog, like a long dust curl.

The Hayeses' house and the VanNests' house were hidden by the shoulder of the hill, but he could see the Heckmans' and a figure slouching on their driveway. Oh, no. That was Tony Heckman. If Richard could see him, Tony could see Richard, and he might follow him.

Richard scowled. Even though Tony's family had lived on Vista Drive before the Hayeses, Richard felt that the hills were *his*, not Tony's. Well, let Tony try to follow him—he wouldn't catch a seasoned dweller in the wild like Richard.

John Thornton, outdoorsman and explorer, watched expressionless as the foolish greenhorn plunged into the desert wastes with only a day's supply of water. Later Thornton would come across Heckman's bleached bones and shrug. Such was the law of the wild.

Richard climbed on up the bare, rocky spine of the hill. He would find shelter farther on, someplace that Tony Heckman didn't know about. His legs bent and straightened, bent and straightened, lifting him up—up—up. At the top of this rise the path met the firebreak, a dusty road scraped up one side of the ridge and down the other.

Richard turned onto another spur of the ridge, away from the firebreak. Examining the trail behind him, he was glad to see that the crumbly rock held no footprints. Even if Tony hiked this far, he would think Richard had gone up the firebreak.

The trail sloped down now, and Richard's street and the town of Lagarto Grande were out of sight. There were only the hills covered with sagebrush, with dead stalks of yuccas sticking out like coat racks, and the canyons dark with wooly-looking oaks.

Why knew, thought Richard as he pushed through the brush, what he might find in these hills? A forgotten tribe of Native Americans. An ancient temple, full of treasure.

In a saddle between hilltops Richard found another large bush, just off the trail. He crawled under its branches, brushing through the blade-shaped, reddish leaves. Dead leaves crackled under his hands and knees. But there was a patch of ground under the bush that was *not* covered with leaves.

On his hands and knees, Richard tenses like a dog sniffing another dog's traces. Someone had been here before him and brushed the leaves away. Look, there was a picture scratched in the smooth dirt. A sort of cartoon of part of an animal with small forelegs—a rabbit? It was hard to tell.

Anyway, someone had been here before Richard. Whoever it was, Richard hated him. What was he doing in Richard's hills? Richard started to back out of the bush to go farther on, but then he stopped. What good would that do? He might actually run into the person, which would be worse than finding a picture. Rubbing out the doodle with his fist, Richard bushed leaves over the dirt. Then he settled himself with his legs crossed.

Richard had to get up on his knees again to pull his provisions out of his back pockets, the crackers a little crushed. Then he unfolded the large blade of his Swiss Army knife and cut the apple in quarters. Carefully he carved out each piece of core, wiped the blade on his jeans, and ate the quarter-apple.

But he couldn't feel comfortable, knowing that someone else had sat under this bush and doodled a picture. Finishing his snack quickly, Richard crawled out from under the bush. A few yards off, the ground fell away into a canyon, hidden by oaks. What was that noise coming from down there?

Richard stood still on the trail and listened. The wind rustled the sagebrush, but that wasn't what he had heard.

There is was again: a bird or animal call. A low, grating sound like a rusty iron hinge. *Vratch*. And again: *Vratch, vraatch*. There must be a whole family of vratches—whatever they were—in the canyon. Richard guessed it was a large bird like a crow, but he knew animals didn't always make the noise you expected from them. Squirrels, for instance, sometimes screeched

instead of chattering. Frogs might yelp instead of croak. Geese could make a barking sound, almost like dogs.

Richard wished he could climb down into the canyon and explore. But the afternoon light was fading. John Thornton knew better than to get caught in this savage country after sundown. He'd better hit the trail.

Back up at the firebreak, Richard saw that the sun was dropping toward the hills across the valley, shining orange into his eyes. It was later than he had thought.

Richard expected to make better time on the way back, since it was downhill. But actually he found himself going more slowly because the downhill trail seemed steeper. His feet slid on the crumbly rock, and his knees grew tired from braking his weight at every step.

Squinting against the low sun, and concentrating on not falling downhill, Richard didn't notice the boy waiting for him on the last slope.

"He, your mom's looking for you."

Startled, Richard raised his head, slipped, and flapped his arms to keep from falling. "What are you doing here?"

"It wasn't my idea," said Tony. "Your mom called my mom to see where you were, and my mom made me go look for you." Turning, he slid down a straight stretch of trail as if he were on a skateboard. Then he stopped and waited for Richard, eyeing him curiously. "What are *you* doing up here?"

Richard thought Tony meant he didn't want Richard hiking in *his* hills. Could be picture under the bush have Tony's? he wondered. He asked in a cautious tone, "Do you hike up here a lot?"

"Why would I do that?" Tony looked surprised. "There's nothing to do in the hills."

Richard scrambled downward, past the other boy. "You never know what you might find," he said over his shoulder. "Like a picture of a strange animal that someone drew under a bush."

Tony hurried after him. "You're nuts. What kind of animal?"

"Well," said Richard. Why had he mentioned that? Now he felt he had to come up with something interesting. "Whatever animal the person saw. For instance, they might see an animal that everyone thought was extinct." Excitement built up in his chest, pushing the words out. "Animals like dinosaurs."

"That's dumb," said Tony as they clambered down the cut into Richard's yard. "Dinosaurs, sure, Oh, yeah. That sounds like this dumb science fiction movie I watched last night."

"I didn't say they *were* dinosaurs. I just said they might look like dinosaurs."

Tony seemed ready to argue some more, but the conversation was over. Mrs. Hayes was waiting outside the back door with her arms folded. "*Richard*. Do you know what time it is? Look, it's practically dark!" She motioned him in the door with an angry sweep of her hand. "Tony, thanks for going after Richard."

"No problem," Tony called back, trotting down the driveway.

"Yes problem," muttered Richard, embarrassed. It wasn't as if Tony were any older than he was or even any better behaved.

"No lip, please," said Mrs. Hayes. "I don't know why you didn't ask Tony to go with you in the first place, like I told you to. Now you are *not* going up there again."

## 2. A Boy Needs a Dog

In the kitchen Richard leaned against the refrigerator, looking away from his mother. Not wanting to think about how mad she was, he thought instead about the yellow reminder slips stuck on the refrigerator door, tickling the back of his neck.

Mrs. Hayes paced from the table to the sink and back again, the line between her eyebrows deepening. “I hope you understand that I’m angry because I was worried. Don’t you have the slightest idea why Dad and I don’t want you to go hiking by yourself? Just imagine, if a brushfire had started while you were in the hills alone—there was a terrible fire in the Malibu Hills last week. Or what if you had met some kind of maniac up there? What if you had broken your ankle?”

Maybe all of that could have happened at once, thought Richard as he watched the twitching hem of his mother’s denim skirt. He could have met a maniac, and fallen and broken his ankle trying to run away from him, and then the maniac could have set a brushfire and run off chuckling evilly, leaving Richard helpless to escape the crackling flames and billowing smoke.

“Anyway, you are *not* going up in those hills again, that’s for sure.”

That was the second time, Richard suddenly realized, that his mother had said that. He stared at her, pushing himself away from the refrigerator. “I can’t go in the hills again?” He could believe his mother really meant that. If he could go up in the hills, they might as well have stayed in Pleasant Acres.

The shock must have shown in Richard’s face, because his mother looked more sympathetic. “I just don’t think it’s safe, by yourself. But we’ll discuss it when your father gets home.”

Richard hung around the driveway, bouncing an old tennis ball and watching the sky over the valley turn darker and darker blue, until his father’s car pulled in. He was hoping to get to Dad first and explain his point of view. But his father shut his eyes and waved his hand in front of his face as if he were shooing away fruit flies. “Give me five minutes, Rich. I’ve had amore or less tough day.”

After Mr. Hayes had laid a folder of papers on the kitchen counter and loosened his tie and kissed Mrs. Hayes, she told him in a serious tone what Richard had done. His father walked into the family room as he listened, followed by Richard and his mother, and sank into an armchair. Laying his palm on his forehead as if he were testing for fever (always a bad sign), he gave Richard the same lecture that his mother had given him earlier.

“But nothing *did* happen,” protested Richard. “I’m sorry Mom got worried, but I was all right—I was just fine. You guys don’t want me to have any fun.”

“You don’t seem to get the point, Richard,” said his mother. “The point isn’t that we don’t want you to have fun. The point is for you to have *safe* fun. What if you *had* broken your ankle? How would we know where to look for you? You’d be helpless.”

“No, I wouldn’t. I could scotch home on my rear end.”

Richard’s father smiled faintly, massaging his forehead under his thin gray hair. “That’s absurd. Your mother’s right—you can’t go hiking by yourself. Get someone to go with you, like the kid across the street—the Heckman kid.”

“That’s what I *told* Rich.” Folding her arms, Richard’s mother sat down on the arm of the sofa.

“That’s not fair—it’s just like saying I can’t go hiking at all.” Richard stood squarely in front of his father’s armchair. “Tony doesn’t even like to hike. It’s not fair!”



“You are not in any position to talk about what’s fair,” said his mother. “I told you not to go hiking by yourself, and you disobeyed me without even talking it over.”

Richard’s heart sank. He wouldn’t even get a chance to explore that canyon. Canyon Vratch, he would have named it.

“Just a minute. I think I have a solution.” Mr. Hayes stopped rubbing his forehead and snapped his fingers. “If Richard got a dog, he’d have a ready-made companion to go on hikes with him.”

“Yeah!” The minute Dad said, it, Richard saw himself again as John Thornton in *The Call of the Wild*, striding into the wilderness with his mighty dog, Buck, beside him. “Yeah, a dog could protect me, and if I broke my ankle or something he’d come back and—”

“A dog,” said Mrs. Hayes with surprise. She pursed her lips at Richard. “I’m not sure he’d be willing to take care of it. Dogs are all right, but *I* don’t want to be the one to feed it and take it out and so on.”

“I think Rich is old enough to be responsible for a dog,” said his father. “Of course, it would have been a nuisance to have the dog cooped up in that tiny yard in Pleasant Acres, but here it would have the run of the hills.”

*And so would I*, thought Richard. “Yeah, he’d get all the exercise he needed, all right.”

Richard’s mother still looked doubtful. “I see what you mean about a dog, but I wonder if Rich really needs to have his own dog. Maybe he could . . . he could borrow Snowball from the VanNests.”

“Snowball!” exclaimed Richard and his father together. Mr. Hayes added, “That fatso dog would have a heart attack at the top of the first hill.”

Mrs. Hayes laughed. “Okay, you’re probably right. Anyway, now that I think of it, I’m sure Gloria VanNest wouldn’t let her precious puppy go off on adventures with Rich.”

“So I get a dog,” said Richard, to pin his parents down. “You mean, tomorrow?”

His mother hesitated, then nodded. His father said, “It’ll be good for you to have the responsibility. And besides—a boy should have a dog.”

When Richard climbed on the bus for his class’s field trip the next morning, he couldn’t think about anything except getting his dog. He was surprised, now, that he hadn’t thought of it before, as he imagined himself having all those John Thornton adventures. After all, that’s what *The Call of the Wild* was about: a dog. A huge, strong dog, Buck was, with a mighty heart. Devoted to his master. Once Buck had won a bet for his master by hauling a sled-load of half a ton, and once he saved his master’s life by pulling him from the icy rapids of a river.

Richard’s thoughts were interrupted by a boy dropping into the seat beside him. A boy with jeans slung low on his hips, chewing a wad of gum as if it were tobacco. “Hi,” said Tony.

“Hi,” said Richard coolly, not sure he wanted a long bus ride with Tony Heckman. Tony was a rib-jabber, as Richard knew from the time Tony had sat beside him in an assembly. He wished his dog, Buck, were already here, trained to growl if anyone tried to poke him.

“I’m getting my own dog,” he found himself saying, as if just mentioning a dog would make Tony keep his hands to himself.

Tony looked interested. “What kind? If I got a dog, I’d get a Doberman. Doberman don’t mess around. If somebody bother’s you, they’d tear his arm right off. *Chomp*—bye-bye, arm. Yeah, I’d get a Doberman.” He put his feet up on the seat in front of him. “What kind of dog are you getting?”

Richard looked casually out the window as he answered. “A mixed breed. He’s part German shepherd, part St. Bernard. He looks like a wolf, only bigger.”

“Oh, yeah?” Tony raised his eyebrows respectfully. “What’re you going to call him? If I got a dog, I’d call him Thor.”

“Buck,” said Richard, relaxing in his seat. Maybe his ribs would be safe for this bus ride, anyway. “I’m calling him Buck.”

At the museum Richard wasn’t sorry when Tony stayed beside him. Maybe the other boy didn’t know many kids, either, he thought. “Did you just move here this year?”

Tony shrugged. “Yeah. We move a lot.”

“*Shh! Shh!*” Their teacher, Mr. Hassler, was glaring in their direction.

Clearing her throat, the museum guide smiled around the group. “Now that we’ve learned how scientists discover the bones of dinosaurs and other prehistoric animals, we’re going to get back into our time machine and zoom forward a few million years. Not quite to the present—to five hundred years ago, when the only people around here were Native Americans, the Lagarto Grande tribe. Follow me into the pottery room, please.”

“Let’s go,” hissed Tony. He jerked his head toward the opposite door.

“Go where?” Richard glanced at Mr. Hassler, but the teacher was turned away, pulling another boy down from a glass case. He hurried after Tony. “Go where?”

Tony frowned at Richard’s sneakers slapping on the tiled floor of the hall. “Keep it quiet.” He slunk along the wall like a cat. “You don’t want to look at pottery, do you? I’m going back to the saber-tooth—”

Just then a door swung open in front of them, and Tony pulled Richard back against the wall. ASSISTANT DIRECTOR, said the sign on the door a few inches from Richard’s nose.

“What’re you—” began Richard, but Tony cut him off with a poke in the ribs.

“—exciting that you’re doing this fieldwork in Lagarto Grande, Dr. MacNary,” said a woman’s crisp voice. “The museum will be glad to assist you in any way we can—aside from the money. Your field, cryptozoology, isn’t one of the areas we support. Now if you were doing archaeological work on the Lagarto Grande tribe itself—”

“But this relates directly to the Native Americans!” A man on the other side of the door sputtered. “My theory is that the Great Lizard Spirit was an actual animal. *Is* an actual animal. I’m holding the picture right in front of you”—there was a sound of paper rattling—“can’t you see it?”

“Dr. MacNary.” The woman’s voice was still calm, but with a hint of warning. “You care showing me a photo from a nature calendar, taken in the Lagarto Grande hills. I see a thicket of sagebrush and what *might* be an animal with large eyes hiding in the bushes. Dr. MacNary, there is no reason—certainly no *scientific* reason—to think that animal is what you call an ornithoid dinosaur. It could just as well be a fawn.”

The man gave a harsh laugh. “A fawn. That’s how you explain away the ornithoid. I suppose you think those are fawns in the Indian pottery designs.”

“I have a great deal of work to do this morning, if you’ll excuse me.” The door hiding Tony and Richard jerked as the woman tried to pull it shut and the man held it open.

Then the door swung shut suddenly, revealing a man with a mottled, boiled-looking face and light frizzy hair. Dr. MacNary held a calendar page in one hand and a black briefcase in the other. “When I have found the ornithoids,” he told the closed door, “and done my experimental work on them to prove that I have discovered a new species, this museum will go down in

history as an obstacle in the—” He caught sight of the boys flattened against the wall, and his eyes bulged even more. “What are *you* doing?”

Richard was so startled he couldn’t speak. But Tony, still flattened against the wall, tried a smile. “Oh, hi. We were—we were just looking for the rest room.”

For a moment the man said nothing, looking down at Tony and Richard as if *they* were a few species of worm. Finally he spoke. “Mm-hm. You thought the rest room was behind the door.”

“We didn’t mean to spy on you or anything,” said Richard in a breathless voice.

Tony gave him a scowl and another jab in the ribs. Dr. MacNary laughed his short, sarcastic laugh. “No? Excuse me, kiddies, but I think you did. And I think I know who sent you.” His pale eyebrows lowered, and he spit out a single word. “Mounce.”

With a knowing nod, Dr. MacNary opened his briefcase and put the calendar page away. “Mounce, that second-rate ornithologist, who would give anything to discredit me.” His purplish lips twitching, he bent toward the boys. “How much is Mounce paying you?”

Richard edged along the wall, away from the man’s stale breath. He opened his mouth to explain that they didn’t know Mr. Mounce, and they wouldn’t spy on anyone for money if they did, and—

“Not that much.” Looking unconcerned, Tony stepped away from the wall. “Mounce is a cheapskate.”

Smiling as if he suspected that, Dr. MacNary took his wallet from the inside pocket of his suit jacket and pulled out a five-dollar bill. He waved it in front of Tony’s eyes. “This much?”

Tony shook his head. Richard began, “To tell the truth—” but he stopped as he noticed Tony’s elbow coming toward his ribs again.

“So don’t tell Mounce anything,” said Dr. MacNary. “Understand?”

Shocked, Richard watched Tony pocket the bill and nod. His face was blank.

“No, I take that back.” Dr. MacNary’s bulging eyes gleamed. “Tell Mounce that *no one* is going to stop me from getting my hands on the ornithoid.” His free hand clenched and unclenched. “No one.” Turning, he strode toward the exit. But as he pushed the door, he glanced back at the boys with a hard look that showed the whites at the bottoms of his eyes.

As Dr. MacNary disappeared, Tony snickered. “What a fruitcake. Five bucks!”

“*Were* you spying for this Mounce guy?” demanded Richard.

Tony gave him a disbelieving look. “Don’t be dumb. I don’t know Mounce from Adam. Dr. MacNary must be one of those crazy scientists who think everybody’s out to steal his secrets.”

“Then why’d you let him think we were spies? If he’s going to look for that animal in the hills, he might see me up there.” Richard wished he had gone to the pottery room with the rest of the class.

“Calm down,” said Tony. “By that time you’ll have your dog, Buck, and if Dr. MacNary lays a finger on you, Buck goes for the jugular.” He grabbed his throat to demonstrate. “Anyway, nothing’s going to happen—unless we don’t get back before Mr. Hassler finds out we’re gone.” Looking toward the exit, he added, “In a way, it’s too bad we can’t follow that MacNary guy. I bet he’s doing something weird he doesn’t want anyone to find out about.”

As they loped back down the corridor, Richard decided not to tell Dad or Mom about Dr. MacNary. They would think he was just the kind of maniac they were worried about Richard meeting in the hills.

“Here.” Tony nudged him through a doorway marked POTTERY ROOM.

Mr. Hassler caught sight of them and beckoned impatiently from the other side of the room, but Richard had just remembered something Dr. MacNary said. Something about the animals in the pottery designs.

The last of their class was trickling out of the room, past the teacher. Richard walked along the display cases as slowly as he dared, peering at the pottery. These bowls only had sun and rain cloud designs on them.

“Richard.” Mr. Hassler stepped toward him, frowning.

Richard quickened his steps past the last case—and then came to a dead stop. This must be the design Dr. MacNary had been talking about. A line of people and animals, animals like kangaroos with ostrich heads, dancing around a pottery jar. “What’s that, Mr. Hassler? What’re those animals?”

The teacher gripped Richard’s arm and steered him toward the door, which Tony was already whisking through. “That, as you would know if you had been here listening to the guide, is the Great Lizard Spirit, after which Lagarto Grande is named.”

“Sorry,” said Tony from the doorway. “We had to go to the rest room.”

The teacher gave him a skeptical glance. “Do you boys think we came to the museum to go to the rest room?”

“No,” said Richard, although that wasn’t the kind of question that really needed an answer. He twisted his head to get one last look at those animals. What had Dr. MacNary called them? Ornithoids. Little front legs with claws held up like hands, powerful hind legs, long thick tails sticking straight out behind.

A lot like the animal he had found doodled in the dirt under the bush.

### 3. Buck

After school that afternoon, Richard’s mother drove him to the county animal shelter. “Now remember, Rich, this is going to be *your* dog, not mine.”

“Yeah, I know, Mom.” Richard fingered the dog collar on his lap, one Snowball had outgrown. Mrs. VanNest had given it to him when she heard he was getting a dog.

“That means you feed the dog, you brush him, you take him for walks.” She turned into the parking lot beside the low concrete-block building. “I don’t need something else to do—I teach nursery school, I play tennis, I’m helping Mrs. VanNest with the school page of the newspaper. And I’m especially busy this week, working with the nursery school kids on the program for Parents’ Day, making sure the mothers finish the costumes—”

“Okay, okay, Mom.” Jumping out of the car, Richard trotted into the animal shelter. A din of yapping and yipping burst out at him, along with a smell of dogs and disinfectant. But the noise and the smell seemed exciting to Richard. They meant he was going to get a dog of his own. Buck.

There were a few other people in the shelter, strolling along the rows of cages and peering at the dogs. “There’s a nice golden retriever,” said Richard’s mother behind him. “Over here, Richard.” She motioned him to a cage where a honey-colored dog with short wavy hair and floppy ears pushed its nose against the wires. “Good dog,” said Mom, holding out her hand. The dog wagged his tail, his brown eyes gazing hopefully at them.

“I don’t know about this one.” Richard was sure this wasn’t buck. He could imagine what Tony would say if he came home with a “good dog” like that. On the other hand, in the next cage

there was a sleek, muscular Doberman with its front paws up on the wires, snarling. Tony was probably right—a dog like that could take someone’s arm off. And it might not be someone *else’s* arm.

Hurrying past the Doberman, Richard thought at first that the next cage was empty. He turned to the other side of the kennel, then stopped and looked again. An animal sat hunched in a back corner. What kind of dog was that? Medium-small, with a thick body and short brown coat. Its flapped ears hung limply, instead of cocking back and forth like the golden retriever’s. Was it sick?

“Here, boy.” Richard snapped his fingers at the creature, curious to see it closer.

As the lumpy dog stepped toward Richard on long legs, he noticed that its front paws barely seemed to touch the cement floor. Maybe it was lame—maybe it had been hurt. There was something unusual about the way its dark eyes were looking at him.

Behind him Mrs. Hayes clicked her tongue. “The poor thing. What kind of a pitiful mongrel is that? Come on, Richard, don’t get its hopes up.”

But Richard was stooping down to the strange dog’s level, holding out his hand for it to sniff. As he stared into its eyes, his mother’s voice seemed to come from far away. The animal looked at him with a steady, searching gaze. As if it was sizing him up, thought Richard with wonder. He was seized with a longing to measure up, to be the kind of boy this animal could trust.

“Richard, are you crazy?” His mother yanked his hand back from the wires, and the peculiar dog hobbled back to its corner. “You shouldn’t let that strange dog touch you. It looks to be like it might be diseased—see how dry its coat is? I don’t know why the shelter didn’t just put it to sleep when they brought it in.”

Hearing Mrs. Hayes’s yell, one of the shelter workers had started over to them. “You okay, kid?” he asked Richard. “That mutt don’t seem like he would hurt anyone, and he’s had his shots, but you shouldn’t stick your hand into the cage.”

“I wonder why the shelter put this dog out for adoption,” said Mrs. Hayes. “No one’s going to take a homely thing like that.”

The worker shrugged. “It does look a lot like a turkey in a dog suit, don’t it? But we have to give them all a chance. You never can tell who’s going to like what.”

Richard was leaning with his arms folded against the wire, looking at the creature crouched in the corner. It looked back at him with its large, dark eyes.

Suddenly Richard hated the way his mother and the shelter man were talking about this dog. He hadn’t thought much, when he came to the shelter, about what happened to dogs who weren’t adopted. But of course he knew. And this weird-looking dog didn’t have a chance of being chosen, as his mother said.

“I like this dog,” Richard heard himself say in a loud voice.

There was a silence behind him, and then Mrs. Hayes gave a short, astonished laugh. But she spoke in a sympathetic tone. “I can see you feel sorry for this poor dog, Rich. I do, too. But you can’t do anything for him. How about it—do you want the golden retriever?”

“As a matter of fact,” said the shelter worker, “the golden’s out of the running. That guy at the desk is already filling out papers on him.”

Mrs. Hayes clicked her tongue in disappointment, but Rich didn’t care. He just wished the weird dog would stop staring at him like that. It wasn’t Richard’s fault that the dog officer had caught it. It wasn’t Richard’s fault what was going to happen to it.

His mother moved to the other side of the kennel. “Look, Rich. This spaniel seems very friendly. I always liked spaniels—more than most dogs, anyway.”

But Richard was staring into the strange dog's eyes again, remembering the part in *The Call of the Wild* where John Thornton first meets Buck, and saves his life. The mighty Buck hadn't looked so great at that point, either. He was in terrible shape, starved and beaten almost to death. But after John Thornton took care of him, he turned out to be a terrific dog. And of course he was devoted to his master.

Richard's mother was at his shoulder again. "It's better not to brood about it, darling," she said in a low voice. "Come see what you think of the spaniel."

"I want to get this dog."

"Oh, Rich." She shook her head. "You have such a good heart, wanting to save this miserable creature. But that wouldn't really be the best thing for him." His mother spent several minutes explaining that a sickly dog wouldn't be any fun for Rich, and probably this dog would have to go to the vet a lot, which would cost money that the family needed for other things, and in the end the dog would probably die anyway, and think how sad that would be.

While his mother was talking like this, Rich kept his head down, leaning against the wires of the cage. Every now and then he glanced across the cage at the strange dog. It was always looking back at him, turning its head from one side to the other.

"Five minutes to closing time," announced the kennel worker.

"Listen, Richard." His mother bent over to look in his face. Her tone was resigned, as if she felt she should try a little longer to talk him out of it, but she knew it was no use. "I just can't see why you're so set on getting this ugly, pitiful dog. You do understand that you're the one who has to take care of it if it needs special care?"

Richard nodded, not listening very closely. What *was* it about the strange dog's eyes?" His chest felt tight.

"And if the dog isn't able to go on long hikes at first, you'll have to adjust to what it can do?"

"Yeah, Mom." As the shelter worker opened the cage and slipped a lead over the dog's head, Richard knelt and buckled Snowball's outgrown collar around its neck. The thick metal-studded collar hung loosely. So did the strange dog's skin, Richard noticed.

Mrs. Hayes went to the counter to fill out the papers. "This dog must have been terribly mistreated by its former owner," she said to the man waiting on her.

He nodded. "His tail looks like it got broken and healed the wrong way. And he don't put much weight on his front legs. No idea who he used to belong to, though. The cops picked him up in the Sew-Sew Shoppe."

Richard's mother laughed in a puzzled way. "The fabric store? You mean he walked in with some customers?"

The man laughed, too. "No, it was a lot more peculiar than that. Someone broke into the Sew-Sew Shoppe in the middle of the night and set off the alarm. When the police got there, there was nobody in the store but this dog, standing in a pile of zippers. The cash register wasn't even toughed. They said it looked like the dog broke in to steal zippers." He chuckled. "This mutt could use some new clothes, all right."

Richard glared at the man. This guy was talking about *his* dog. "I'm going to wait in the car, Mom. Come on, Buck."

Buck rolled his eyes up at his new master. As if it were an effort for him, he wagged his thick tail from side to side three times. Then he followed Richard out of the shelter.

As their car pulled around the last steep curve of Vista Drive, Richard spotted Tony swooping downhill on his bike, into the Heckmans' driveway. He hoped Tony would go into his house. But

when the other boy saw the Hayeses' car, he zipped across the street, screeching to a halt beside the car door. "Did you get your dog?"

"Tony," said Mrs. Hayes, leaning toward Richard's window, "that was quite dangerous, the way you rode your bike right behind the car. What if—"

Tony, peering into the backseat, paid no attention. "What's *that*?"

"My dog, Buck." Richard cleared his throat. "He's kind of sick right now, but he'll shape up."

For once Tony was too surprised to make any smart remarks. He just stared as Richard let Buck out of the backseat. "That's a dog?" he said finally. "A cross between a German shepherd and a St. Bernard?"

Richard stared at Buck, too, wishing now that he had chosen the spaniel or even the killer Doberman. Why *had* he picked this lumpy animal? There was a reason, but he couldn't remember it.

Then something struck him about the dog's odd shape. If you took away the fur and the flap ears, and shortened the front legs, what would he look like? He would look a lot like the designs on the Indian jars—the Great Lizard Spirit.

"A cross between a teddy bear and a turkey, if you ask me," Tony went on.

Richard was glad to have a chance to jab Tony in the ribs. "Sh! My mom doesn't know."

"Know what?" asked Tony, still in a loud voice.

Beckoning, Richard leg Tony around the edge of the front yard. "Come on in back," he whispered. "I'll explain everything." Buck walked stiffly beside him, poking his head forward at each step.

"Hey, piggy!" Tony called down into the VanNests' yard, where Snowball lay on her side in front of the doghouse. "Oink, oink, oink!"

The sow-like white dog raised her head and sniffed the air. Then, to Richard's surprise, she struggled to her feet. Running to the concrete wall below them, she put her paws up and whined.

"Relax, piggy," said Tony.

"She's all upset because she smells Buck." Richard was pleased, because the way Snowball was acting worked into his story. "If you were a dog and you smelled a dinosaur, you'd get pretty upset, too."

"A dinosaur—sure." Tony bent down to sniff Buck's back. "P-yew. He just smells like a dog—and like that stuff they mop rest rooms with."

"Yeah, that's because he's been in the shelter. But a dog, like Snowball, can smell his real dinosaur scent underneath. Dogs can smell a lot better than we can, you know."

Sitting down on the patio on the bench around the pepper tree, Richard went on with his story. "See, these animals—I call them vratches because they make a noise like *vratch, vratch*—have been hiding in the hills ever since the white man first came to Lagarto Grande."

"Oh, sure." Tony dropped into a patio chair. "A bunch of animals that big could run around the hills for years, and no one would notice them. Sure."

"That's just what they're afraid of," said Richard in a serious tone. "They're afraid somebody's going to find them and put them in a zoo. Somebody like Dr. MacNary. So now they don't go out of their canyon unless they have a disguise on, like this dog suit."

Tony looked at Buck and then at Richard with his head on one side, grinning as if he were humoring his little sister. "You mean they make their own disguises?"

Richard hadn't thought about that, but now he realized it fit in with what the man at the shelter had told them. "Yeah. They're very smart—it's like they have a little civilization going in that canyon. They sew their disguises out of dog skins, from dogs that get killed by cars. But

they have to steal the zippers. That's how Buck got caught. The cops found him in the Sew-Sew Shoppe in the middle of the night, standing on a pile of zippers."

By now Tony was hooting with scornful laughter. Richard could see the other boy thought he was a nitwit, but somehow he could help going on with the story. "Of course the cops don't know all this I'm telling you. They think Buck just happened to wander in with a burglar."

Tony snorted and rolled his eyes. "Of *course*. Oh, yeah."

"And you know the pictures on the jars in the museum," added Richard as another idea struck him. "The Native Americans must have thought these little dinosaurs were the Great Lizard Spirit."

"Oh, sure." Tony stood up, hands on his hips. "How come the Indians saw them and white people didn't?"

"Because the Indians treated them right—they brought them gifts and stuff. But the vatches know we'd catch them and put them in cages, so no white person has ever laid eyes on them."

"You're full of it," said Tony. "You're as goofy as that guy in the museum—Dr. MacNary."

"Excuse me, boys." Richard's mother appeared at the sliding door. "Tony, your mother's calling you."

"If you told *him* all that junk," continued Tony, strolling toward the driveway, "he'd probably believe the whole thing. What a fruitcake." As he rounded the corner of the garage, he tossed a last remark over his shoulder. "If I were you, I'd take that loser mutt back and trade him in for a real dog."

#### 4. Hidden Animals

Sitting in the fernlike shade of the pepper tree, Richard studied his dog. He wouldn't have admitted it to Tony, but Buck did look pretty bad. "We have to fatten you up, Buck. Wait right here—I'll get some dog chow."

Richard knew his mother had bought a bag of dog chow on the way home, but he couldn't find it anywhere in the kitchen. "Mom?"

He went out to the front yard to look for her. She was standing at the edge of the terrace with her arms folded, talking to Mrs. VanNest in the driveway below. The neighbor was leaning against her car, sunglasses pushed up on her head so that she seemed to have two sets of eyes.

"It's a Lagarto Grande Community Education class, you mean," Richard's mother was saying.

Richard was about to interrupt and ask about the dog chow when he was startled by Mrs. VanNest's answer. "Yes, but this is completely different from most of those classes. Hon, this Dr. MacNary is working on the *cutting edge* of science. And we have him right here in Lagarto Grande!"

Richard stood with his head bent, scuffing the gravel path with his sneaker. Dr. MacNary, teaching a class in Lagarto Grande?

"And the name of the course is Cryptozoology?" asked Richard's mother.

"That's right. It means *the science of hidden animals*. Isn't that delightful? The whole course will be fieldwork—searching these hills for an undiscovered species. Starting a week from Tuesday."

Richard stiffened. Searching these hills! *His* hills. Not just Dr. MacNary, but a whole class.



“It just doesn’t seem very likely to me,” his mother say saying. “How could an animal that large go undiscovered? It’d have to be in disguise!” She laughed. “What proof does he have—did he find tracks or something?”

Mrs. VanNest laughed back in a kindly way. “Much better proof than tracks! He has an actual photograph; he told me when he brought in the course description. So this is our chance to take part in a real scientific project!”

Shaking her head, Mrs. Hayes smiled. “I’ll think about it.”

“If I were you,” insisted the neighbor woman, “I’d call Community Ed and sign up right now. The class will be announced in the *Grande View*, but it’ll be filled up fast, it’s such an exciting opportunity. We’re going to comb these hills with a fine-tooth comb and mark the ground as we cover it with red tags on stakes. Very methodical. ‘Every rise and canyon,’ Dr. MacNary says.”

“I don’t see how I could take the time off, but thanks so much for telling me, Gloria. Excuse me, I think Richard wants to ask me something.”

But Richard had forgotten what he wanted to ask. He was staring into space, feeling sick. Comb the hills with a fine-tooth comb! Every rise and canyon! Some wild place the hills would be, when Mrs. VanNest and Dr. MacNary got through with them.

The thought of Dr. MacNary and all the people in his course crawling over the hills reminded Richard of something that happened last summer. He had gone to the kitchen to cut himself a piece of a homemade chocolate cake with white icing. Lifting up the plastic wrap over the cake, he noticed tiny holes in the icing. Then he noticed little black ants scurrying in and out of the holes and a thread of ants trailing down the side of the cake and across the counter to a crack in the wall.

Richard’s skin crawled. The sight was bad enough, but there was a funny smell, too, a whiff of something under the buttery vanilla of the icing and the chocolate of the cake. Almost a chemical smell. Ants.

“Richard.” His mother shook his shoulder. “Didn’t you want to ask me something?”

It turned out that she had put the dog chow bag in the broom closet because it was too big to fit in a kitchen cupboard. Scooping a couple of cups of chow into the new dog dish, Richard noticed the picture on the bag. A nice normal dog—a golden retriever.

Richard carried the dish out to the patio and set it down on the flagstones in front of Buck. “Here you go. Eat up.” He couldn’t help thinking, though, that no matter how much weight Buck put on—even if he got as fat as Snowball—he still would be shaped like a regular dog.

Buck looked at the pan with his head on one side. He picked up a piece of dog chow in his jaws, but immediately he let it fall out again.

“What’s the matter with you?” Richard was worried. “You’ve got to eat—your coat’s all loose.” A disturbing thought came to him: What if Buck was really sick, too sick to eat? It was okay to make up wild stories for Tony, but the fact was that Richard had brought home a poor, funny-looking, half-starved dog, and now he had to take care of him. Richard was sure John Thornton would give up on a dog just because he looked ridiculous.

“Look, Buck—good.” He pointed to the pan of hard brown lumps. “Mm, good food for dogs.”

Buck turned his head away.

Richard felt desperate. “You dumb mutt, can’t you even eat?” He snatched up a piece of dog chow and popped it into his mouth. “Good, see?” He chewed the coarse-grained lump. “Really, it’s not bad. Sort of like stale bread.”

But Buck seemed to have lost interest in the dog chow. He pushed himself to his feet and shuffled to the edge of the patio where a line of ants were scurrying from their anthill to the corner of the house. Putting his nose down to the anthill, he began to edge along the line.

At first Richard smiled. It was funny the way dogs were so interested in ordinary little things, like ants. Then he realized that as Buck's muzzle moved over the line, the ants were gone, except for a stray here and there. Buck was *eating* the ants.

Feeling his jaw go loose, Richard watched Buck clean up a line of ants several feet long. He had to poke his muzzle under the barbecue grill to reach the last few. Richard remembered John Thornton's words about *his* Buck: "Never was there such a dog." That was certainly true of Richard's Buck, too.

Then, as if he might have hurt Buck's feelings, Richard reached down and patted his shoulder. It didn't feel the way he expected. Buck in *The Call of the Wild*, Richard recalled, had muscles like steel springs. This dog's muscles felt . . . sort of spongy. Frowning, Richard tried to feel Buck's shoulder again, but the dog moved aside as if he would rather not be touched.

"Maybe you're too thirsty to eat dry food, huh?" Dogs needed plenty of water, Richard remembered. He went back to the kitchen for a bowl, filled it at the hose, and offered it to Buck.

Buck was thirsty, all right. Dipping his muzzle into the bowl, he raised his head straight up as if he were going to howl. Richard heard the water gurgle down Buck's throat. What was that glinting under his jaw? Richard bent forward to see better, but the animal quickly lowered his head. It must have been the buckle on his collar.

Never was there such a dog, thought Richard.

At dinner that night Richard remarked to his parents, "Hey, you know what Buck eats?" He described how Buck had licked up the whole long line of ants.

His mother and father looked at him with raised eyebrows. "A dog might eat a horsefly that was biting him, now and then, but he wouldn't eat ants," said his father.

"I'll show you. Here, Buck." Richard pointed to a large black ant staggering across the floor with a crumb. "Ant! Nice ant. Eat ant, Buck. Mm."

Buck shuffled over to the ant and bent his head. "Oh, my goodness!! He *is* going to eat it," said Richard's mother.

Then Buck glanced up at Mrs. Hayes, leaning against the kitchen counter, and over his shoulder at the kitchen table where Mr. Hayes was sitting. He shuffled back to Richard's feet and sat down.

With a laugh, Mrs. Hayes went back to scraping garbage into the sink. "So much for our anteater disguised as a dog!"

Richard opened his mouth to protest, but the growling of the garbage disposal cut off conversation. By the time she switched the disposal off, his mother was onto a new topic. "Rich, Mrs. VanNest asked me if you might have something you'd written for school, like a poem or an essay. She was looking for something to fill up the school page of the *Grande View*."

"We haven't done anything like that yet," said Richard.

"What about a picture, then? I told Mrs. VanNest you liked to draw, and she said a picture would be fine. Maybe one of the pictures you taped up on the wall in your room?"

"Aw, Mom, they aren't that good." What Richard really meant was that he didn't want to give them away. Especially the one of the hills. He was proud of the way that one had turned out, showing the folds in the earth spreading out from the top of the ridge. "I'll draw a few one for her, if she wants."

Richard's father, who had been leaning under the edge of the table to study Buck, spoke up. "Maybe it's just that he's not feeling well, but there's something strange about this dog. Every other dog I've known was more or less friendly."

Dad was right, thought Richard. Normally, dogs *liked* to be touched. Dogs nudged you with their noses, and jumped up on you, and put their muzzles in your lap so that you would rub behind their ears or under their chins. Dogs rolled over so that you could scratch their stomachs. As Mrs. VanNest had showed Richard with Snowball, they *really* loved to be rubbed right on the big bone in the middle of their chests. Of course with Snowball, it wasn't easy to find that bone, or any bone, under the pads of fat.

Quickly, before Buck could dodge him, Richard bent and braced one hand on the animal's back. He placed his other hand at the base of Buck's throat, feeling for the lump of his breastbone. But his fingers met something else—something small and hard and flat buried in Buck's dry fur. Then Buck's throat throbbed with a low, grating sound, and Buck twisted away from him.

"Get away, Rich!" His mother's hand flew to her mouth.

"He didn't bite me, Mom." Richard sat up, trying to act calm, although his own heart was thudding. "He just doesn't want to be touched."

Mrs. Hayes shook his head. "I don't know how you pick them, Rich. This dog isn't going to be able to go hiking with you for a while, and that was the whole idea of getting a dog. And aside from that—well, he looks more less like a dog you'd get at a discount store, on the bargain table."

"You mean like those shorts I got you once?" Mrs. Hayes' eyes twinkled. "The ones marked Slightly Irregular?"

Richard's father nodded ruefully. "M-hm. The shorts with only one leg. *Slightly* irregular."

When Richard had heard that story before, he thought it was very funny. But now he didn't laugh. Looking down on the top of Buck's dull brown head, he wanted to protect him from his mother and father and Tony and the people at the shelter and everyone else who would make fun of a strange-looking dog. "Buck can't help the way he looks." He stood up to take Buck to his room, where no one could laugh at him. "Come on, boy."

Still studying Buck, Mr. Hayes went on in a serious voice. "Do you think he's all right, Sue? Look at the way he's sitting, as if he's uncomfortable. And the fact that he doesn't seem to want to be touched. Maybe he dislocated a shoulder or something."

"I think he'd be whimpering if he were hurt," said Mrs. Hayes.

Richard snapped his fingers. "Come on, Buck."

"Still," said his father, "if he doesn't seem better Monday—no, Monday's Veteran's Day. If he doesn't seem better by Tuesday, I think you should take him to the vet and get some X-rays on him."

Leading buck to his room, Richard found himself talking to the dog as if he could understand. "Never mind what they say, Buck. Once you get some rest and some meat on your bones, you'll be terrific." He had always thought it was idiotic when he heard Mrs. VanNest talking to Snowball: "Want to go ride-rides with Mummy in the car?" All the time Mrs. VanNest was talking, Snowball would like on her side with her eyes closed, only a twitching ear showing that she might be listening.

But Buck watched with his dark eyes, blinking, as Richard showed him around his room. He pointed out his bookcase, with one shelf just for the pieces of quartz and mica he had found in

the hills, and the disk that used to belong to his older cousin Ted, with Ted's initials carved into the top.

"See, the top drawer is where I keep my Swiss Army knife," said Richard. "It has a regular knife blade, two screwdrivers, a can opener, a punch thing . . ." He opened all the blades for Buck and then folded them in again, while Buck watched with his head on one side. It was strange, thought Richard, that Buck didn't cock his ears back and forth while he was listening. His ear flaps hung limply.

"And this is your bed." Richard pointed to the floor pillow beside his bed, big enough for a dog to curl up on. "Want to have a rest?"

This must have been just what Buck wanted, because with a low throaty sound he lowered himself onto the floor pillow. He crouched there for a moment with his legs tucked under him. Then, glancing up at Richard, he rearranged himself so that he was lying on his side, curled up.

"Richard!" His father was calling from the kitchen. "Telephone!"

To Richard's surprise, it was Tony. Without saying hello, the other boy started in. "You probably think somebody would believe that crock about Buck. Well, nobody would, even if they were really dumb, because if your dog were really a—what did you call it?—a vratch, a little dinosaur, then he'd have those little front legs, right? Like little arms and hands."

"I guess so," said Richard.

"Yeah, he sure would. Then how can his dog suit have those long front legs, like dogs have?" Tony gave a short, triumphant laugh. "It wouldn't work if they were just stuffed with cotton or something, would it? He couldn't walk on them."

Richard wished he hadn't told Tony that story. All right it was dumb. But why was Tony still thinking about the vratches, anyway? The trouble was, once Richard started making up something like that, it was hard to stop. "No, it's not just stuffing." He paused, letting the explanation pop into his head. "The way they do it is, they make long bones out of wood, like the bones in a dog's leg. Then they put the bones inside the front legs of the suit, with padding to look like muscles, and when they put the suit on, they hold onto the top of the bones. See?"

"It'd be like walking on stilts, the front legs." Tony spoke slowly, as if he were picturing it.

"Right," said Richard eagerly, in spite of himself. "Or like people on skis, holding ski poles."

A scornful snort came out of the phone. "You should go to my sister's nursery school and tell stories to little kids. You're full of it." The line clicked roughly.

Richard's face burned. Stalking into the family room, he flopped on the sofa. The roars of laughter from the TV seemed to be aimed at him, a boy stupid enough to tell Tony Heckman the spacey things he imagined. Richard wished he had a friend in Lagarto Grande, a friend who liked *The Call of the Wild*.

## 5. Spies

As soon as his eyes opened the next morning, Saturday, Richard rolled over and hung over the side of his bed to see how Buck was.

Buck seemed to be asleep—at least, his eyes were closed. But he was in a peculiar position. Instead of curling up on the pillow or stretching out on his side the way dogs do, Buck was hunched in a crouch. Sort of like a hen on a nest, thought Richard.

As he watched, one of Buck's large dark eyes opened. For just a second the animal, staring at Richard, seemed frightened. He let out a growl almost like a croak. Then, seeming to recognize Richard and relax, he wagged his tail slowly.

"Good boy," said Richard. "Good old Buck. Want some breakfast? Let's see what there is." He swung his legs over the side of the bed. "Come on, Buck." He made encouraging little noises for Buck to follow him.

Pulling a sweatshirt over his pajamas, Richard tiptoes out to the kitchen. He noticed one of his mother's yellow sticky notes on the refrigerator door as he opened it: *Tues. p.m.—Buck to vet.*

Richard helped himself to Chinese spareribs, left over from last night. The half carton of slimy vegetables he left on the shelf. "Do you like spareribs, Buck? Sit, boy."

Buck slowly eased himself into a sitting position, but when Richard held out a sparerib, he turned his head away. Again Richard felt a pang of worry. Tucking an extra fortune cookie into his sweatshirt pocket, he led Buck out the patio door. "Maybe we'll find some more ants."

Richard sat down by the barbecue grill to eat his spareribs, but a crunching noise in the geranium bed behind him made him turn his head. "Buck, what are you doing?"

At first Richard was afraid his pet was eating the geraniums—that would give Mom a fit. But no—Buck was nosing under the leaves, picking something out of them and swallowing it with a life of his muzzle and quick crunch.

Hurling his sparerib bones up the bank into the sagebrush, Richard stopped and pushed aside the geranium leaves. Three or four round brown shells, the size of cherries, rolled onto the flagstones. "Snails?"

Buck gulped down another snail, gazing at him as if to ask, What do you think of this?

"It's okay," said Richard, suddenly worried that Buck would stop eating. "Forget I said anything. Look, here's some more." He scooped up the snails he had shaken from the leaves and dropped them in front of Buck. "Go ahead, eat them."

While Buck gobbled the snails one at a time, Richard took the fortune cookies from the pouch pocket of his sweatshirt, broke it open, and pulled out the thin strip of paper. *He who treads on the tail of the dragon, reaps misfortune.*

Richard popped the pieces of the fortune cookie into his mouth as he strolled around the garage to the driveway. What kind of misfortune? An uneasy feeling came over him.

Tilting his head back, he gazed up the canyon at his hills. Today was clear and cool, a good day for a hike, but of course Buck wasn't strong enough to keep up with him yet. A frown tightened Richard's forehead. Maybe Buck wouldn't be well even before Dr. MacNary led his class over the hills, next week. Maybe the hills would be spoiled by the next time Richard got up there. That would be misfortune, all right.

Now that Richard thought of it, he was afraid that Dr. MacNary had already been looking around in the hills. "Who else would doodle an animal that looked like the Great Lizard Spirit?" he asked Buck, who had followed him to the driveway.

Richard's eye was caught by an object hurtling down the steep street—Tony, he realized with annoyance. The other boy swooped calm-faced into the Hayeses' driveway. "What's happening?" When Richard shrugged, Tony went on, "We've got that five bucks. We could rent some movies or something."

After the way Tony had talked to him last night, Richard was surprised that he was acting friendly. "Yeah, maybe we could. . . . Hey, you know that guy Dr. MacNary? He's going to ruin these hills." Richard didn't expect Tony to care that much, but he found himself explaining how Dr. MacNary was going to lead a whole class over the hills, marking them with stakes and red

tags, searching every rise and canyon. “The stupid thing is,” he finished, “it’s all for nothing. An imaginary animal.”

“I’d feel sorry for any animal *he* finds,” remarked Tony. “He’s probably the kind of scientist that carves up animals in his laboratory.” As he said this he leaned toward buck, making a gruesome face. Buck edged behind Richard.

Richard wished Tony hadn’t said that, although he was afraid it was true. “If only someone could talk Dr. MacNary out of searching the hills . . . Maybe my dad would—”

“No, you’ve got the wrong idea.” Leaning back on his bicycle seat, Tony tossed his shaggy head. “You don’t *talk* to a guy like that. You know what we should do?”

“What?” asked Richard, surprised at the “we.”

“We should make this MacNary guy *sweat*.” Tony pushed his jaw forward as he said the last word. “Instead of asking him very, very nicely please not to wreck the hills, we should jump *him* first.” Lifting the front wheel of his bike by the handlebars, Tony thumped it down on the pavement.

“Don’t be dumb. How could we do anything to *him*?” But Richard felt a smile twitching the corners of his mouth. “What do you mean—what could we do?”

A gleam came into Tony’s eyes, and a slow smile like Richard’s spread over his face. “Spy on him.”

At first Richard was excited about the idea. “Yeah! If we got evidence that he’s doing horrible experiments on animals, we could call the SPCA. Maybe even the police.” Then he realized there was a hitch. “How are we going to spy on him when we don’t even know where he lives?”

“The telephone book,” said Tony in a tone that meant Richard wasn’t too sharp. He swung off his bike, dropping it on the driveway. “Come on.”

In the house, they took the phone book from the kitchen to Richard’s room. Buck, crouched on the floor pillow, watched as they spread it open on the desk. After an argument about how to spell MacNary—McNary? MacNerry?—they looked it up under all the possible spellings they could imagine. There was no MacNary in the Lagarto Grande phone book.

“You think you’re so smart!” exclaimed Richard remembering something. “I bet I know why he isn’t in this phone book. It’s been here since the summer, and probably Dr. MacNary just moved to Lagarto Grande.”

“Shoot!” Tony scowled. “We could get his phone number from Directory Assistance, probably, but that wouldn’t help.

Then Richard thought of another way they might find out where Dr. MacNary was staying: ask Mrs. VanNest. “You’d better talk to her,” said Tony. “She hates my guts.”

At the VanNests’, Richard knocked with the woodpecker door-knocker, wondering what he would say if Mrs. VanNest asked why he wanted to see the cryptozoologist.

But Mrs. Van Nest didn’t ask, because she thought she already knew. “He’s such a fascinating young man! Dr. MacNary is staying at the Lagarto Palms Apartments—do you know where that is, across from the park? But don’t pester him, hon, if he says he doesn’t have time to chat. Dr. MacNary is going a speech Monday at the Cryptozoological Association meeting in Riverside, and I know he’s working on it. It’s quite an important speech—cryptozoologists from all over the Southwest will be there.”

When Richard reported to Tony, the other boy’s face lit up. “All *right!* Let’s go. *We* won’t pester him. Oh, no.”

“You stay here, Buck,” Richard told his pet. He hated to leave Buck alone, but Buck certainly couldn’t run along behind his bike like a regular dog. “I’ll be back pretty soon.”

Buck wagged his tail, as if he understood.

“Bye, turkey,” said Tony. To Richard he added, “Why does he wag his tail that way? Like he just learned how to do it.”

Already halfway down the hall, Richard pretended he hadn't heard. “Mom, we're going for a bike ride,” he said as he paused in the kitchen.

His parents looked up from their eggs and coffee and newspaper. “What about Buck?” asked Mr. Hayes. “Did you take him outside this morning?”

“Yeah, I did.” Richard thought of Buck crunching up the snails. “He'll be fine in my room.”

A few minutes later the boys were on their bikes, coasting back and forth down the zigzags of Vista Drive. Squinting against the wind, Richard felt excited to be going spying with Tony, and he was pleased because he had gotten the information from Mrs. VanNest without giving anything away. It wasn't until they were all the way down in the valley, pedaling past the baseball diamond in the park, that Richard began to wonder what he and Tony thought they were doing. He remembered his fortune cookie message. Was bothering Dr. MacNary like treading on the tail of a dragon?

Tony, ahead of Richard, stopped with one foot on the curb and started across the street. Two scraggly palm trees leaned across each other in front of the pink two-story apartment building. “Here we are.” He said loudly.

“Yeah, but now what?” asked Richard. “What if he's on the second floor? We can't just knock on his door and say, ‘Excuse me, can we come in and spy on you?’ ”

Tony didn't answer, except to beckon Richard to follow him. Rolling across the street, they pulled their bikes up the steps to the entrance.

“Why don't we put them in the bike rack down there?” whispered Richard, pointing.

Tony shook his head. “Might have to make a quick getaway.”

There was an open doorway into an area with mailboxes and doorbells. “Here, see? MacNary, 1-D.” Tony tapped the name on one of the mailboxes. “So he *is* on the first floor, wise guy.”

“But this is locked.” Richard tugged at the glass door leading into the building.

“But that doesn't matter,” said Tony, “because we're going to look in his window from outside.”

“So why did we have to haul our bikes up here, then?” Richard felt jittery, and he was annoyed that Tony seemed to think he was in charge.

Pushing their bikes into the bike rack after all, the boys slipped into the bushes that surrounded the apartments. They were good bushes for hiding in, nice and thick, the kind with red berries. And thorns, thought Richard as they poked through his jeans.

The boys edged farther along the side of the building, trying not to get stuck by thorns any more than they had to. “Ow!” said Tony. “Somebody should clip these bushes. Okay, here's the first window. Give me a hand up.”

Richard made a stirrup with his hands, boosting Tony while he hoisted himself up so his elbows were resting on the window ledge. “Can you see him?”

“Um—I don't think this is his apartment. Unless he has a girlfriend.” Tony jumped down.

“Give me a hand, now. I want to look.” Hauling himself up until his chin was level with the bottom of the window, Richard cupped his hands around his eyes to shut out the light. Through the sticks of a bamboo shade he could see into a small kitchen.

Right across from the window were the sink, stove, and refrigerator. Actually, Richard couldn't see the sink, because it was overflowing with dirty dishes and pans. Between the sink and the window was a small Formica table. There was an ashtray with several cigarette stubs in

it, and bright pink lipstick on the cigarette butts. “No,” he whispered, jumping down. “That jerk couldn’t have a girlfriend.”

At the next window, Richard stooped to boost Tony again. Tony stayed up there, saying nothing, until Richard’s hands began to go numb.

“Well?” whispered Richard. “Is *this* his place?”

“I don’t think so.” Tony eased himself down. “I don’t see any cages. Unless they’re in back.”

“Let me look.” Richard stepped into Tony’s interlocked hands. Again there was a bamboo shad in front of the window, and Richard had to squint through the sticks. In this room the sink and counter were nearly bare. On an open shelf above the sink there were rows of soup cans, with the labels all turned to the front. The only thing on the table was a large manila envelope.

Then the picture taped to the refrigerator caught Richard’s eye. It was as big as a poster—a blowup on a smaller photograph, judging from the grainy look. Gray-green sagebrush cut through by a narrow, rocky trail. That could have been taken right up in the Lagarto Grande hills, thought Richard. My hills.

The picture puzzled Richard, because Dr. MacNary didn’t seem like the type to appreciate nature. And besides, there wasn’t anything dazzling about this picture—no waterfall, no sunset, no giant redwoods. Just the feathery gray-green of sagebrush bushes.

“You weigh a ton,” complained Tony below him. “Hurry it up, will you?”

Richard didn’t answer. He squashed his nose against the window, trying to make out a shape in the sagebrush. Was that an eye, a large, dark, gleaming eye? The picture reminded him of a kind of puzzle he used to like, ones with a caption like, *Can you find the six elephants hidden in this picture?*

Only this was the ornithoid hidden in the picture. Richard’s heart thumped. *Ornithoid*—you might expect Dr. MacNary to give a wonderful animal an ugly name. It was a vratch, a real vratch. An animal covered with silvery feathers, but not a bird. There was one of the small hands. And the eye—the dark eye gazed at Richard as if it could see right into him. Richard felt a great longing to be near this creature, to sit and watch it for hours. He felt he was on the point of understanding something very important, if only . . .

Then he had to squeeze his tired eyes shut. When he opened them, he couldn’t make out the vratch in the picture anymore. “Oh, no,” he groaned.

“If you don’t get down,” said Tony, “I’m going to drop you.”

Jumping onto the dirt, Richard stared at Tony wildly. “That *is* Dr. MacNary’s place! That must be the picture Dr. MacNary had in the museum, only bigger. Remember—the one he was talking to that lady about? And he’s not crazy. That is a—an ornithoid. I mean, a vratch.”

“Sure,” said Tony with a snort. “And I’m a wookie. Okay, I guess that’s probably his picture and his apartment. But the picture’s just a bunch of bushes, like the lady in the museum said. You’re as crazy as—”

Tony stopped short, and Richard froze. Above their heads came the squeak of a window cranking open.

Without hesitating Tony plunged through the thorny bushes like a rhinoceros. Richard put his arms in front of his face and dashed after him to the bike rack.

“Hey, you little creeps!” called a man’s voice, but they didn’t look back.

For several blocks Richard and Tony just pedaled as hard as they could. Then as they reached Mountain Avenue, Tony slowed down enough to look back at Richard. Tony was grinning widely.



Richard had thought he was too scared to be anything but scared, but now he pedaled slowly, too, and a smile started to spread over his face. Tony glanced back again, laughing, and Richard started to laugh, and then they were both laughing so hard that they had to pull over to the curb, leaning on their bikes. “Hey—you—little—creeps!” sputtered Tony.

The rest of the way home Richard felt good. They hadn’t really done what they thought they were going to do—they didn’t have any evidence to report to the SPCA, for instance—but Tony had been right about trying to make Dr. MacNary sweat. It made him feel better.

Richard’s bike bumped over a storm drain grating, and the jolt sobered him. Just a minute. Why was he feeling so good? His hills were still in danger. In fact, now that Richard had seen the nature calendar picture, he knew that Dr. MacNary wouldn’t stop until he had found that gray-green creature lurking in the sagebrush. Until he had found it—or ruined Richard’s hills trying.

As they reached Tony’s driveway, Mr. Heckman stopped cutting the lawn long enough to yell at Tony to come do his chores. Richard went home to check on Buck. The animal seemed to be waiting for Richard, sitting just inside the door of his room. With little gruff noises he led Richard to the edge of the rug, to a space of bare wooden floor beside the desk.

“What is it, Buck? Ants?” If ants were coming right into Richard’s room, that would be very handy. In fact, he had toyed with the idea of dribbling a trail of honey from the patio to the wall outside his window and in the window to the floor. The only thing against it was that his mother might notice.

Then Richard focused on what Buck was showing him: deep scratches on the wooden floor. He gasped. “Buck! Why’d you have to do that? Bad dog!” Oh, brother. If Mom saw this, it would upset her a lot more than a trail of ants.

Frantically he glanced around the room for something, anything, to hide the scratches. Buck’s floor pillow. Dragging the pillow across the room, Richard was relieved to see that it easily covered the scratches. There. Maybe he could find out how to repair the floor before Mom discovered the damage.

But why had Buck done it? Richard shook a forefinger at him. “Don’t ever do that again—hear me?”

Buck hung his head. He looked almost discouraged, the way his shoulders slumped.

That afternoon Richard’s father took him bowling. Later, back home again, the phone was ringing as Mr. Hayes opened the kitchen door. Richard didn’t pay any attention, since it seemed to be a call for his father, and he went straight to his room. It was time to take Buck outside.

But when he led Buck through the kitchen, his father said, “Some scientist wants to take a look at your dog.”

\* \* \*

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