

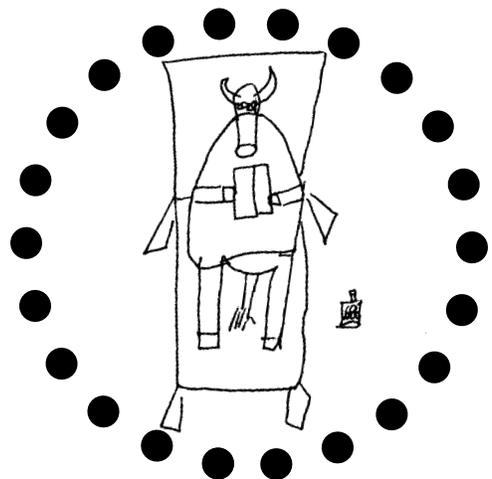
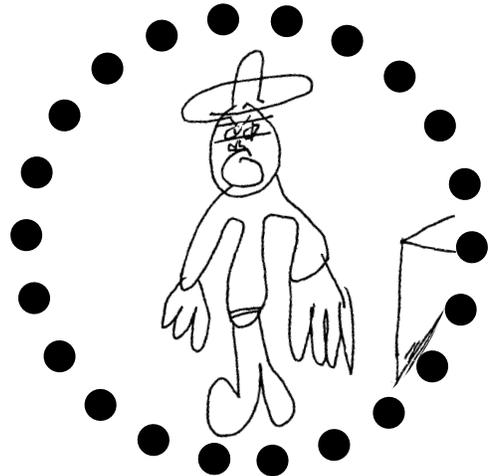
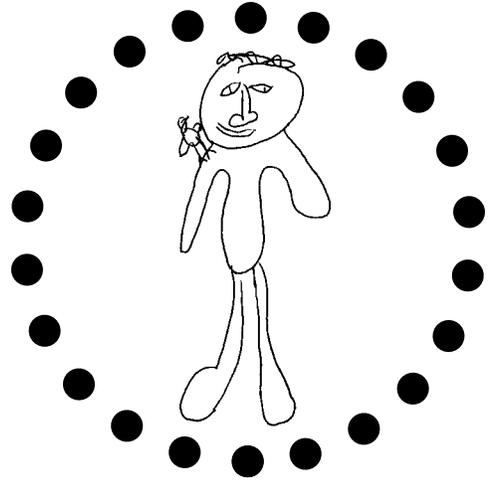
JACK

AND THE

LUMP

OF

CLAY



Written by
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For Jack Dunphy
and
Hal Baum

You know the story: A poor boy named Jack is sent to the market to sell their cow for food money. Along the way, he runs into an old man who trades him magic beans for the cow and, after an adventure with a giant, the story ends happily for Jack and his family.

This is not that story. This is a story about another boy named Jack.

Many years later, it came to pass that there was another boy named Jack whose family was also very poor. Their one cow had also recently stopped producing milk. Instead of having Jack take the cow to market, however, this Jack's Mother told him to walk up and down the road looking for a little old man who would trade some magic beans for the cow.

So Jack took his cow for a walk and, after a little while, he passed an old man standing on the side of the road. The old man was sitting on a large, flat rock, looking as though he were waiting for Jack to come along.

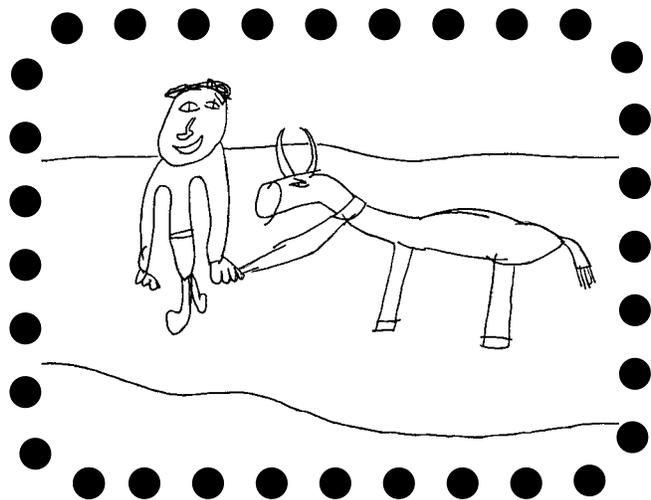
As Jack expected, the old man already knew his name. In a scratchy, wavering voice, the old man called out, "Jaa-ack!"

"How do you know my name?" Jack asked, playing along with the story.

"Thaa-at's not importaa-ant," the old man said. "What *is* importaa-ant is that I am looking for a cow thaa-at has recently stopped producing milk. I caa-an tell your cow, who you caa-all 'Milky,' no longer produces any milk."

Jack thought to himself, 'This was easy.' Then he asked out loud, "So... you are willing to trade me some magic beans for Milky, my cow?"

The old man shook his head and looked sad. He continued in his scratchy voice, as if he were recalling a story from long ago. "I'm afrai-aid you are thinking of my brother Nate. Nate was the one with the bea-eans. He, too, was looking for a cow thaa-at had stopped producing milk. He was plaa-anning to go to the market, but before he got there, alo-ong came a boy named Jack with the perfect cow. So Nate traded his beans for the cow. I don't know what haa-appened to the boy, but Nate and the cow went on many fantastical journeys and ended up



outwitting an Ogre and now-ow they live on the Ogre's island. They're as rich and as haa-appy as any old man and a cow can be."

Then the old man looked at Jack and, as if he were sharing a secret, said, "To tell you the truth, Nate wasn't the brightest staa-ar in the sky, if you know what I mean. But that cow was smaa-art enough for the both of them. If it weren't for the cow, I am pretty sure that old Nate would have been eaten au gratin by that Ogre, if you understaa-and my meaning."

Jack didn't understand 'au gratin', but he certainly understood 'eaten' and 'by that ogre,' so he nodded.

Jack enjoyed the story, but he was on a quest for magic beans, so he said, "Well, that's certainly an interesting tale and I could tell you what happened to the boy. In fact, I think everyone in the world *but you* knows what happened to *that* Jack. But *this* Jack (and he pointed to himself) was sent out by his Mother to trade Milky for some magic beans." Then he concluded bluntly, "Since you have no magic beans, I must continue on my way."

There was something about the old man that made Jack hesitate to simply walk away. The man was holding *something* in his right hand, so he asked, "You're sure you don't have any magic beans, right?"

The old man looked very sad again and said, "Nope. All I haa-ave is this lump of clay." He opened his bony hand to reveal a smallish-sized ball of reddish-brown clay.

For a few seconds they stood there, Jack looking at the lump of clay and the old man looking sadly into Jack's eyes. Jack looked down the road to the market. It was a *very* long road and he didn't see any other old men standing by the side of it. It was a hot day and Jack was already tired and hungry.

Jack asked, "Is it *magic* at least?"

The old man smiled and Jack saw that most of the old man's teeth were missing. The old man said, "But of course."

Jack considered for a moment. He said slowly, "I don't know. My mother has her heart set on magic beans."

The old man replied very quickly, "But the other Jack's Mother haa-ad *her* heart set on *money* and not magic beans. So maybe she'll understand."

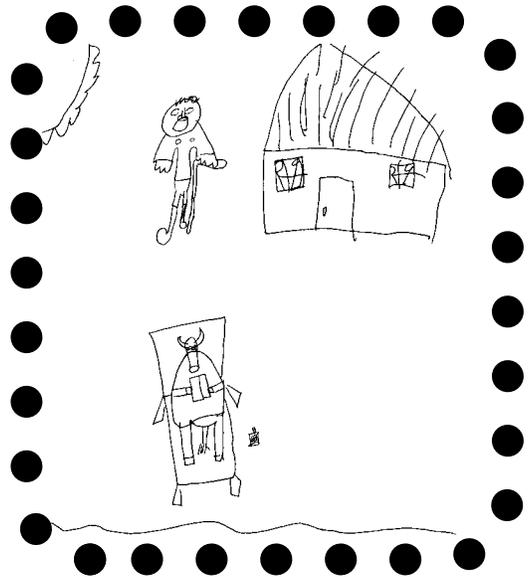
This was good enough for Jack, and, anyway, he really didn't want to walk up and down the road for days hoping another old man happened to have some magic beans. So Jack said, "It's a deal."

Jack handed him the rope holding Milky and the old man handed Jack the magic clay. Well, Jack certainly *hoped* the clay was magic.

When Jack got home, Jack's Mother didn't even look at him before she said, "Now throw those beans out the window and get on your climbing boots."

"Um, Mom?" Jack started. But instead of finishing his sentence, he opened his hands to show her the lump of clay.

Jack's Mother said matter-of-factly, "That's not *beans*." She looked at Jack with great disappointment, as if she could not believe that he had returned without beans.



A little more cheerfully than he felt, Jack said, "It's magic clay!" Jack's Mother was not pleased. "Please don't tell me you traded our cow for a lump of clay."

"But it's magic," Jack countered a little less cheerfully this time. "And I got it from Nate's brother." Jack explained who Nate was, but Jack's Mother just stood there shaking her head during the whole explanation.

Then she said firmly, "You go right back to that old man and tell him that he either gives you the magic beans, which I am sure he has, or he returns our cow. Then you stay on that road until you get us some magic beans. We don't want to be poor forever."

Jack's Mother pointed to the front door. Jack had no choice and, feeling very stupid, he hung his head as he marched outside and down the road.

Jack went to the spot where he had traded Milky to the old man and, of course, the old man was nowhere to be found. After looking around for what felt like hours to Jack, but was really only a few minutes, Jack sat down on the rock and waited. He didn't cry. Not because he wasn't sad or because crying never did any good in stories like this, but because he was fairly certain that someone would come along and tell him what to do next. Maybe an elf or a princess or Rumpelstiltskin or something. But the more he looked up and down the road, and the more he said, "Here comes something!" or "Look who comes now!" the more it seemed as though *nothing* would ever come down the road.

Finally, he got mad. Jack stood up on top of that rock and yelled, "Little old man! Brother of Nate! You come back here and trade me back my cow or else I will-, I will-, I will..." But there he stopped, since he could not think of what he might do if the old man didn't trade him back the cow. In frustration, Jack took the lump of clay and threw it, as hard as he could, at the road.

Oh, of course, *you* can guess what happened next. But Jack was so mad and frustrated he had forgotten the lump of clay was supposed to be magic.

As the clay hit the path, out came a tiny, muffled-sounding "ouch!"

At first Jack didn't know what had made the "ouch!" sound, but after a few seconds he remembered that the clay was supposed to be magic and he went over and picked it up.

Jack asked, "Did *you* say 'ouch'?"

Instead of saying 'yes,' which is what Jack had hoped and expected, the lump of clay asked a question. Its voice was smallish, like a child's, and muffled. It sounded as if a child were speaking with his hands over his mouth. "Are you the one who threw me on the hard ground?"

Jack shuffled his feet and tried to look as sorry as he could. He stammered, "I- I- I didn't know you were magic."

The lump of clay responded sharply, "You certainly *did* know I was magic. I heard Ethan tell you so." The lump quickly explained, though he didn't need to, that Ethan was the name of the old man.

Jack shuffled his feet some more. "I- I- I guess I for- for- forgot," he said.

Jack expected the clay to be mad, but it wasn't. In a nice, though still small and muffled voice, it said, "You really can't be blamed. Talking clay isn't something that happens every day."

Not sure what he was supposed to say, Jack tried, "Thank you." Then he added, "Thank you for understanding."

The two of them stood there for a few seconds, Jack holding the clay in his hands and the clay, well, just being a lump of clay, until Jack asked, "What happens next?"

The lump of clay said nothing. So much nothing, in fact, that Jack started to wonder if it had really spoken earlier.

Finally, in its same odd voice, the clay answered Jack's question, "I'm not sure." It said nothing for another long amount of time, until it added, "To be honest, I didn't even know I could talk until the 'ouch!' came out."

Jack sat back down on the rock and tried to think. He thought about all the stories like this he knew. He tried to remember the magic items that were in them and what their owners had done. Not one of them had a lump of talking clay.

There were those magic beans, of course. Which you planted.

There was also a story with magic melon seeds, which worked just like the beans.

There was a magic lamp, which, for some reason, you rubbed. For a second Jack was hopeful. He rubbed the clay, but nothing happened.

Jack thought of more stories with magic items.

He remembered hearing a story with a magic purse which you opened to find coins. And no matter how many times you removed the coins, there were always more when you opened it again. 'That would be easy,' thought Jack.

He sort of remembered a story with a magic flute, which he decided he would try to play. But he didn't know what happened next.

Jack could think of two stories with magic boots, which, he also thought would be easy. Just put them on and try to run fast, or leap, or, better yet, fly. If none of those worked, Jack decided he'd try to walk on water. First starting with shallow water and then working up to deeper water. Just in case they weren't *water-walking* boots.

Jack wondered, 'Why couldn't I have been given magic boots or seeds or a flute or a purse? I would know what to do with any of those things!'

He also recalled a story with magic apples that, instead of eating yourself, you were supposed to feed to a dying princess. 'But even *that* would be easier to figure out than magic clay,' Jack moaned, 'especially since the boy in that story was *told* to feed the apples to the princess.'

Finally Jack looked down at the lump in his hand. "Magic clay?" he asked.

"Yes?" responded the clay.

"I think I need some help. I want to ask someone else for advice. But I also know from lots of other stories that magic talking items become quiet just when you need them to talk most." The clay said nothing, so Jack continued, "If I take you to my Mother or someone else would you at least let them hear you speak?"

The magic clay said uncertainly, "If I *can*. I might not be *able* to talk to anyone else. Or they might not be able to *hear* me."

Jack thought it over to himself, 'That makes sense and seems fair.' He stood up quickly and said aloud, "All right. Then, here is the plan. I'll take you home to my Mother and you *try* to talk to her. Until she hears you, I'll say nothing. Then once she hears you, maybe she'll help us figure out what to do next."

"Good idea," squeaked the clay. And it *was* a good idea, don't you agree?

The walk home was fairly long, especially on such a hot day. Just as Jack was rounding the last corner towards his house he felt a sharp pain on his palm. "Ouch!" he exclaimed.

When Jack opened his hand, he noticed that instead of holding a lump of clay in his hand, he was holding a *bear-shaped* lump of clay in his hand.

"Hey!" Jack demanded, "why did you bite me!"

The little bear-shaped lump of clay said simply, and no longer with that muffled sound, "You squeezed me too hard."

Jack looked closely at the clay shape and even he had to admit that it didn't look *exactly* like a bear. The clay looked somewhat like a bear and somewhat like a dog, but not very much like either. And the bear's tail was probably more suitable for a rabbit. But the clay looked

more like a bear than like anything else, if only barely.

Jack asked, "Did you make *yourself* into a bear, or did I do that?"

Instead of answering Jack's question, the clay asked one of his own, "Do you have a mirror in your house?"

"Yes," Jack said.

"Before you bring me to your mother, could you bring me to the mirror?"

"Surely," Jack said. And he did.

Once they were in front of the mirror, the clay frowned at Jack in the same way Jack's teacher frowned at him when he missed an easy math question.

The clay chided Jack, "Not a very good bear, I must say." And then, also, like Jack's teacher, the clay spoke slowly when he advised, "Pull out the tail a little, thicken the legs, shorten the ears, and round out the snout." Jack did exactly as the clay asked. When Jack was finished, the clay looked in the mirror again. The clay declared loudly, "Now *that's* a bear!"

Jack was very pleased. The clay bear walked back and forth on Jack's hand and up his arm a little, admiring himself in the mirror from every angle. "A very handsome looking bear," the clay said proudly. "Not too mean looking, but not too meek looking either." He nodded his clay head up and down as he continued to admire himself. "A *very* handsome bear."

"Now can I show you to my Mother?" Jack asked.

The bear got a thoughtful look on its face and then said, "Maybe you shouldn't just yet. Maybe we could first think of something we could do with a boy and a talking bear-shaped lump of clay."

Jack sat down on the floor and thought. "We could join the circus," he said.

The clay shook its little bear head. "I don't want to be a tiny performing bear."

After a few more minutes, Jack offered unsurely, "We could go on adventures."

The bear nodded its head slowly, but not as if he were agreeing with Jack's suggestion, only as if he were considering it. He said slowly, "If we do, we would need something to adventure *for*. Such as a goose that lays golden eggs. Or a magic kingdom." Then, after he thought for a little more, the clay added, "And I'm not sure a small talking clay bear and a boy would be the best team."

Jack offered excitedly, "I could make you into something else." Then Jack thought of all the things he could make from clay and became less excited. "How about a dog?" he asked uncertainly.

The bear shook its head.

"A rabbit?" Jack asked.

The clay bear looked at his bottom, where the rabbit tail used to be, and grinned. "I'm not sure a rabbit or a dog would be much better than a bear."

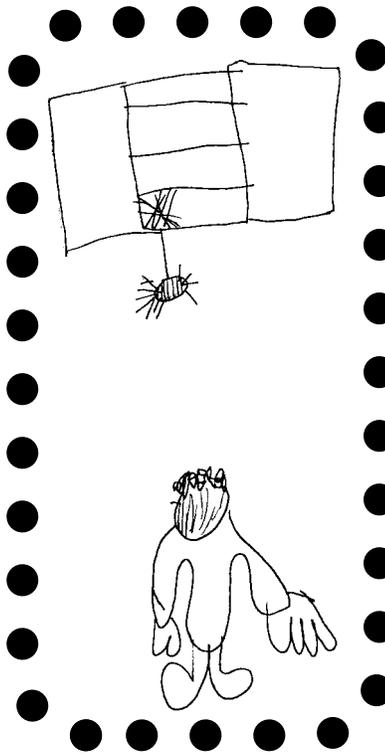
Jack said sadly, "I can't make much more."

Jack expected the clay to be disappointed, but he wasn't. The clay bear climbed up Jack's arm and onto his shoulder. He looked Jack right in the eyes and declared, "With a little practice and my help, I'm sure you'll soon be able to make a great many wonderful things out of clay."

At that moment, Jack's stomach gurgled. Jack asked the clay bear, "Are you hungry?" Jack hoped he would say he was.

"Actually, I am not," the clay said. "Which is odd, because you would think a bear would *always* be hungry. But if *you're* hungry, why don't we go into the kitchen and get you something to eat."

As soon as Jack and the bear got into the kitchen Jack remembered why he had been



sent to sell the cow. They had no food. "I wish we had some chicken," Jack said.

A little nervously, the clay bear said, "Don't look at me." Jack laughed. "I am not going to make you into a chicken! And anyway, I doubt a clay chicken would taste very good."

"That's a relief," the clay said.

That's when Jack had another good idea. "Couldn't I make you into something that *catches* chickens? Or wild turkeys? There are a lot of wild turkeys in the woods, but I can't seem to catch them myself."

The clay smiled at Jack, again like Jack's teacher, but this time like when Jack gets a hard question correct.

Jack continued slowly, puzzling out the situation, "You can *move* like a bear, even though you're made of clay. You seem to have sharp teeth like a bear, even though you're made of clay. And you can *talk* like a ... umm ... *person* even though you're shaped like a bear. So you can tell me what works and doesn't work, so I'm pretty sure we could collect as much food from the forest as we'd ever need to eat."

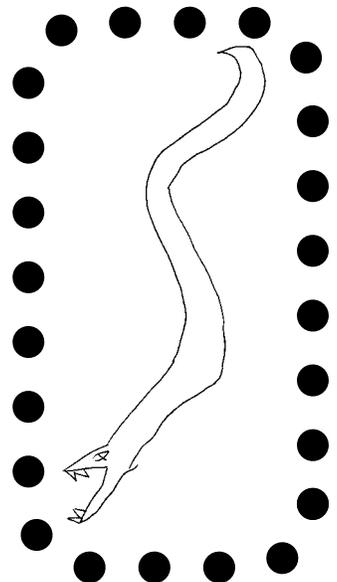
And that's what they did for the next few days. Even though Jack's Mother was mad about his having traded their cow for a

useless lump of clay, she was very happy that Jack had become, so suddenly, such a great hunter. Jack and his Mother had more than they could eat. And Jack's Mother traded the extra wild turkeys for vegetables and milk and even some cakes, so they were very happy and very well fed.

One other thing that I should mention is that Jack and the lump of clay decided that the clay lump needed a name. The only name that both of them thought seemed to fit was 'Clay.'

When they decided this, the clay lump was shaped like a snake. He got an odd look on his face, rubbed under his mouth with the end of his tail and said, "That name sounds familiar."

So, after that, no matter what the clay was shaped like, be it a tiny rabbit or a tiny dog or even a tiny bowl, Jack called him 'Clay.'



One morning, about two weeks later, Clay, who was now shaped like a snapping turtle, wondered, "Aren't we supposed to go see the King?"

"Why?" Jack asked. Jack was quite contentedly chewing on some candy, a very rare treat before the lump of clay came along.

Clay explained, "From what I understand about stories like this is that the little boys and their magic items are supposed to go see the King. Or the Sultan. Or whoever it is who rules the land. Then they solve some sort of problem and are rewarded with riches and, many times, the Princess' hand in marriage."

“Yuck!” Jack said out of habit. And then, once he got over the ‘marriage’ part, exclaimed, “You’re right! That *is* usually what happens.”

So the next morning, Jack told his Mother that he was going out hunting but, instead, he traded two wild turkeys for a ride to the King’s city and back.

Very soon after he traded the turkeys, he was sitting in the back of a cart being pulled by two horses. There were many people going to the city that day. Some with crates full of things to sell. Some with long lists of things to buy. Some with fancy clothes and some with plain old clothes like Jack’s. ‘But,’ Jack thought, ‘I’m the only one with a lump of magic clay!’ Not that he was sure what he would do with the lump of clay once he got to the King. *If* he got to the King.

Jack started to think of how he might convince the King to see him and his magic lump of clay. He was going to ask the lump of clay, but decided it’d be best not to talk to the clay during the trip and soon he was watching the scenery and the people they passed instead of thinking.

A few miles into the trip, Jack’s cart met up with another cart full of people going to the city. This one had a large number of animals attached to it. And then they met up with a rich man and his two sons, all of whom had fancy horses. And then another cart, mostly full of peacocks, parrots, and other colorful birds for some reason. And then three carriages full of women, driven by fancy men with long coats, top hats, and gloves. And then nine men on horseback, who looked to Jack to be pretty dangerous. They were all dressed in black and wearing their hats tilted so far down in front you couldn’t see their faces.

With all this going on, you can understand why Jack had trouble concentrating on making a plan to see the King.

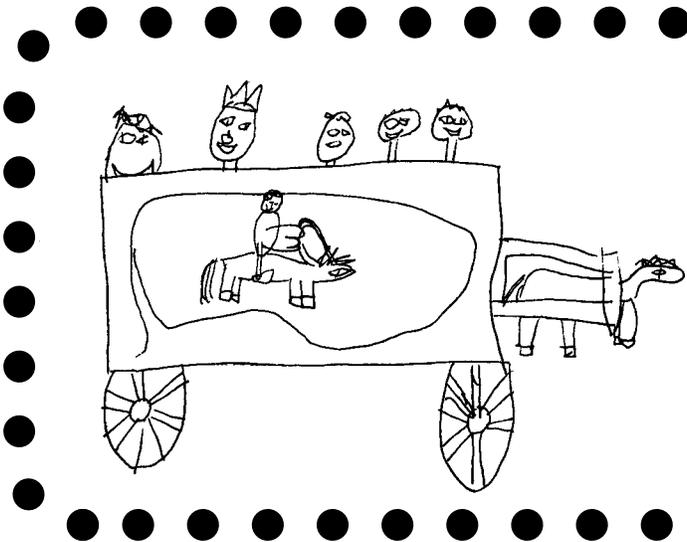
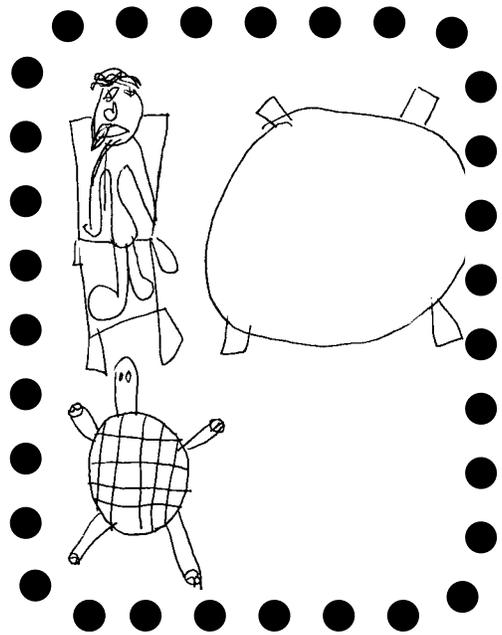
The closer they got to the King’s city, the more travelers joined them. When they were

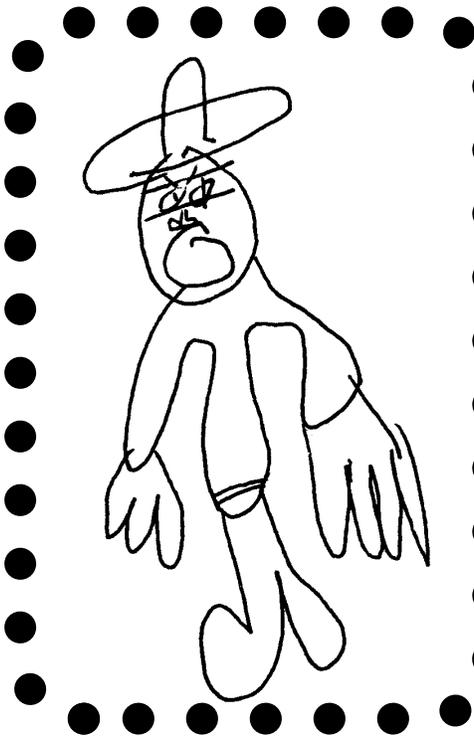
about an hour away, they were quite a large group of all sorts of wagons and carriages and people and animals.

Finally, they were joined by a very fancy carriage surrounded by a dozen or so soldiers on horses. The woman sitting next to Jack whispered, “It’s Thelda, the King’s niece.”

Quietly, so only Jack could hear him, Clay said, “Right on schedule.”

A few miles before the King’s city was a large, gloomy forest called The Dark Woods. The Dark Woods was the home of a successful robber named, not very imaginatively, Dirk of the Dark Woods.





You could always tell it was Dirk of the Dark Woods since he had lots of bright red hair and an eye patch covering the eye he lost during one of his dramatic escapes from the King's champion.

(That's how he *said* he lost it. The way he *really* lost it was this: He was running with a stick, fell, and poked it out. Just like his Mother kept telling him would happen if he ran with sticks.)

To help protect the party riding to the King's city, or at least to protect Thelda, the soldiers rode to the very front of the group and started checking the edges of the woods to make sure there were no robbers nearby.

As soon as the soldiers had gone ahead, the nine men dressed all in black rode right up to Thelda's carriage and cut her horses free. Her carriage stopped where it was, blocking the path, forcing all the carts and carriages behind it to stop as well.

Eight of the nine riders pulled out crossbows. The ninth rider, by far the largest, pulled off his cloak and hat. He had an eyepatch and so much red hair that it looked as though his head had caught on fire. It was, of course, Dirk

of the Dark Woods!

Again, so only Jack could hear him, Clay said, "*Also* right on schedule."

Dirk jumped on top of Thelda's carriage and yelled to the soldiers. His voice was deep and booming. He sounded more like a stage actor than a robber. "Get off your horses and drop your swords or we will kill the King's niece."

The soldiers did as they were told. All at once, ten more of Dirk's men ran out from the woods and started tying up the soldiers.

Jack looked behind him to see that there were *another* ten of Dirk's men blocking their path backwards. They had already started tying some of the traveler's hands behind their backs. Everyone was trapped.

Jack acted quickly. He turned his lump of clay into a mouse and dropped him over the side of the cart. No sooner did the mouse hit the ground, than one of the robbers grabbed Jack, twisted his hands behind his back, and tied them firmly together with a rope.

Within minutes, all the travelers were tied up and – along with all of the carriages and carts and horses and animals – escorted far enough into the woods that they could not be seen from the road.

All the travelers were told to sit and, one by one, the robbers tied their feet together so they couldn't run away.

Soon it got dark. And very soon after that Jack felt something pulling gently at the ropes on his feet. It was, of course, the clay mouse. In seconds, he had Jack's feet free and then crawled around and gnawed through the ropes on Jack's hands.

Jack whispered, "Thanks, Clay. But it's not safe for me to try to escape right now, so I'll stay here until everyone's asleep. You go see if you can hear Dirk's plans and then, before morning, we'll meet by the city gates."

"Make me into a bat," Clay said. Jack did. Even though it was dark and Jack's hands were numb from being tied up so long, he knew he had done a good job. After so much practice, Jack was getting pretty good at making animals out of clay.

“Thanks,” Clay said.

“Thank *you*,” Jack said. Then Clay flew off.

The man tied up next to Jack gave Jack a dirty look. The man complained loudly, “Not only are we captured by Dirk of the Dark Woods, but I have to be tied up next to a kid who talks to himself.”

“Don’t worry,” Jack said softly. “I won’t be here long.”

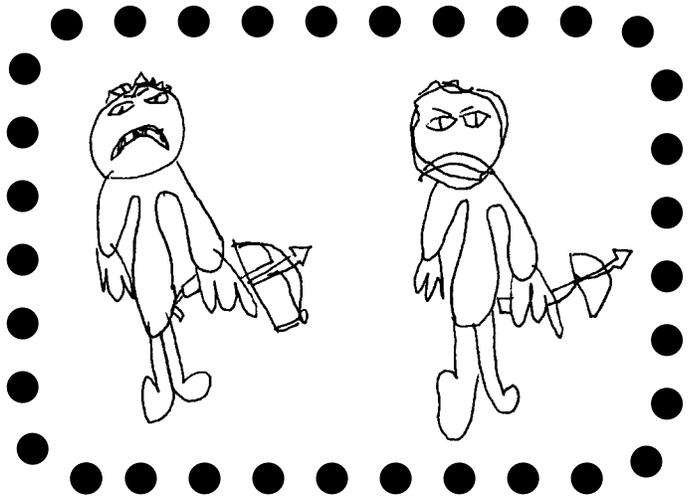
One of the guards yelled, “No talking, you two!”

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A few hours later, nearly everyone, including most of Dirk’s men, were asleep. This was Jack’s chance! He started slowly crawling away, being careful that no one saw him. But he wasn’t careful enough.

One of the robbers hollered, “Hey, you! Where do you think you’re going?”

Jack jumped up and started to run as fast as he could. Jack looked back to see the robber put a bolt into his crossbow. Jack knew the robber was an excellent shot. All of Dirk’s men were. So Jack expected, at any second, for a crossbow bolt to go right through his body. He wondered what that would feel like. He didn’t imagine it would feel good.



But just as the robber was about to pull the trigger, Jack heard him yell “Ack!” and the crossbow bolt whizzed by, missing Jack by a few feet. Jack ran a few more yards, then ducked behind a clump of trees.

Jack heard another robber ask, “What happened?”

The man who shot at Jack replied, “That little kid ran away.”

“Why didn’t you shoot him?”

“I *tried*, but a bird or a bat or something flew into my face and messed up my aim.”

The other robber laughed and said, “A fine excuse!” After he finished laughing, he said, “Ahhh. Don’t worry about him. He was just a worthless little rat. And we’re leaving in the morning, anyway.”

The two robbers left to go back to sleep and Jack made his escape complete.

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Jack was walking towards the city gates when a bat landed on his shoulder. Normally this type of thing would scare you, but Jack was used to small animals climbing up his legs, jumping on his back, or landing on his head.

Jack welcomed him warmly, “Hey, Clay! Thanks for saving my life!”

“Anytime,” said Clay. Clay then said, “Before we go the guard, let me tell you what I heard.” Clay explained that Dirk was planning on taking the travelers to his hideout and ransoming them back to their relatives. He expected to get quite a bit of money for Thelda, the King’s niece.

“Did you learn where the hideout was?” asked Jack.

“Not exactly,” said Clay. “But I heard Dirk say that it was two days walk northwest, so that should help determine the location.”

After that, the two of them proceeded to the guard at the city gates. Jack explained, “We just escaped from Dirk of the Dark Woods.”

It was fairly clear that the guard did not believe Jack’s story. “Is that so?”

“It’s true,” Jack assured.

Still, the city guard was doubtful. He looked down at Jack menacingly. “Who’s ‘we’?”

“Huh?” asked Jack.

“You said ‘we just escaped’ and I only see one of you.”

Jack knew he wouldn’t get far trying to explain that the ‘we’ was a poor boy and a talking clay bat, so he tried another tactic. He looked up into the guard’s eyes and asked, boldly, “Do you want to be the one who refused to try to save the King’s niece?”

That got the guard’s attention! “The King’s niece?” asked the guard. “How did you know that we were expecting the King’s niece?”

Jack knew this plan had worked. He pressed harder, “Do you want to take me to the King or not?”

In minutes, Jack was brought into the King’s bedroom, which was the fanciest, largest bedroom Jack had ever seen. The bed alone was almost as big as Jack’s whole house and it was so covered in pillows and curtains and bedspreads and tassels that Jack wondered how anyone could actually sleep in it. With such a large bed, Jack expected the King to be equally large.

When the King entered, Jack saw that the opposite was true. The King was quite small, not much larger than Jack, in fact. And he didn’t look very much like a King. He had a bushy gray beard, very little hair on his head, and a tired, worried look on his face. (He had been up all night fretting about his missing niece.)

Adding to his non-Kingly appearance were the pajamas he was wearing. Purple and white striped ones. And they were a little too big, as if his Mom were expecting him to grow into them.

Large or small, in a royal robe or striped pajamas, this was the King and Jack had to help him save his niece and the other people.

He quickly told the King everything exactly as it had happened, except he left out any mention of a talking lump of clay, pretending instead he had untied his own binds and overheard Dirk’s plan himself.

Jack wasn’t sure the King completely believed him and wondered what the punishment was for lying to a King. Jack became terrified when the King called to his guards, but was relieved when the King told the guards, “Hurry up and get a small army ready to leave the castle in ten minutes. We’re going to search for Dirk of the Dark Wood’s hideout and rescue my niece.”

As the guards were getting together the army, a little old man with a long, pointy beard came into the room. He was even smaller than the King. He was the King’s Advisor.

The King had Jack repeat the whole story to the Advisor. Jack again left out any mention of Clay and the King’s Advisor also only sort of believed the story.

He must have believed it enough, because as soon as Jack ended, the Advisor said seriously to the King, “We need to make a plan.”

Unfortunately for Jack, they went into the hallway to make their plan. Fortunately for Jack, he had a lump of magic clay in his pocket.

Jack turned the clay into a ferret (which is like a friendlier-looking weasel) and the clay ferret followed the King and his Advisor out of the room and heard the entire plan.

Clay returned and reported what he had overheard: The King's Advisor didn't think they could find Dirk's hideout with so little information, so they decided to attack Dirk and his men in the woods.

Jack said glumly, "Many people will die."

Clay agreed that it was a bad plan, "And that's certainly not how a story like this is supposed to end."

Jack stated simply, "Which means we need a better plan."

Clay had an idea what the plan might be, but he also knew that it was up to the little boy, the story's hero, to solve the big riddle. So Clay waited until Jack spoke.

"OK," said Jack. "Here's what I think we should do." He spoke very slowly, as if he were figuring some of it out as he went on, "I'll turn you into a fast bird, like an eagle or a hawk or something. You fly ahead and find Dirk and the other robbers. They'll likely send some of the robbers to their hideout to get things set up. You follow these robbers and learn where the hideout is. Then you come back, quickly, and tell me where it is. I'll pretend to *remember* that I overheard Dirk say something about something nearby the hideout and I'll tell the King about it. Then I'm sure he'll change his plans and go to the hideout." After he finished, Jack wasn't so sure about this plan. He looked at Clay, who was still a small, red-colored ferret. Unsurely, he asked, "What do you think?"

Clay said simply, "I think it'll work." Jack was happy.

So Jack turned Clay from a ferret into a hawk and, except for the fact he was not much bigger than your hand and was entirely reddish-brown, you would not be able to tell him from the real thing.

Clay flew in front of a mirror and, after examining himself, said to Jack, "You've gotten very good at this, Jack." Then he flew out of the window and up into the sky.

For half a day, the King, the Advisor, the King's soldiers, and Jack walked through the woods heading towards Dirk and his men. Jack was worried that they might get to Dirk before Clay got back, but soon he felt the comforting 'thunk' of a small animal landing on his shoulder.

The first thing Clay said to Jack wasn't the location of the hideout or about any landmark near the hideout. What he said was, "Thelda looks very familiar. When I flew over the group of captives, I saw her. Just a glimpse. But enough to know that I had seen her before. More than just *seen* her before. Knew her very well." Uncertainly, as if it didn't quite sound right, he added, "I think I might be *her* lump of magic clay."

Jack was very sad to hear this. Clay had become Jack's best friend and he didn't want Clay to have to go away to some snooty King's niece's house to live and likely be turned into a talking clay baby doll or ballerina or something else girly. But he couldn't think of that right now. He had to focus on getting to Dirk's hideout before Dirk did.

Urgently, Jack asked, "Did you learn about the hideout and how to get into it?"

"Yes," said Clay. He told Jack where it was and Jack told the Advisor and the Advisor told the King and the King decided that it was smarter to go to the hideout than attack Dirk in the woods. The King's new plan was to set up an ambush inside the hideout waiting for Dirk's men to arrive.

And that's exactly what they did.

They easily captured the four robbers who had gone to the hideout ahead of everyone else. They set up the ambush inside Dirk's hideout. And when Dirk and his men and the prisoners arrived, they were very surprised to see that instead of four robbers waiting for them, there were over fifty of the King's best soldiers. The robbers were so surprised they gave up without a fight.

Jack and Clay's plan had worked perfectly! There was no battle in the woods and no one even got hurt. Dirk and his men were captured and all the prisoners were freed.

All that was left to do now was to return their belongings. Since everything that belonged to the travelers had been piled into one cart, the King had to go through the collection piece by piece seeing what belonged to whom. The Advisor stood in the cart lifting up the items, one by one, and asking for the owner to come forward and collect it.

At one point, the soldier held up a picture of a girl and a boy. The picture was hard to see from where Jack sat, but the frame was bright gold and sparkled from the many gems that lined its edges. Thelda walked forward and claimed it. She collected her frame and put it on the growing pile of her very fancy things.

In the meantime, Clay, who had been turned into a drinking cup (Jack figured no one would ever look twice at a reddish-brown drinking cup), whispered, "I want to get a better look at that picture."

Jack quickly turned Clay into sparrow. Clay flew over to the frame and, within seconds, flew back. He was shaking all over.

If a reddish-brown lump of clay could be pale, then Clay was. "That's me," said Clay. He explained. "It's a picture of a boy and a girl. The girl in it is Thelda. And the boy is me."

"Are you sure?" asked Jack.

"As sure as I'm now a magic lump of clay that looks like a sparrow," responded Clay.

"So what do we do?" asked Jack.

The clay bird shrugged. But before he could say anything, the King, who was standing right next to Jack at this point, surprised them by saying, "You certainly have a way with birds."

Jack flinched, but said nothing.

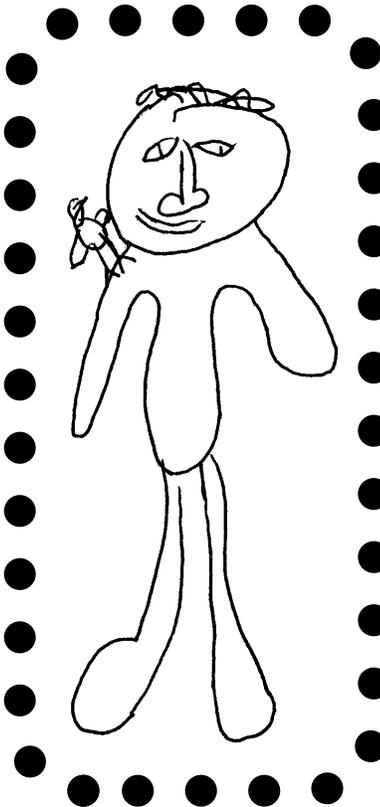
The King spoke as if he knew more than he were letting on. "When I so much as get *near* birds, they fly away. But you have a sparrow sitting on your shoulder and, instead of scaring it away, you seem to be able to talk to it."

It was Jack's turn to become pale.

The King continued, "All the bird was doing was chirping and chirping, but it did seem as though you were having a conversation with it."

Jack realized, finally, that only he could understand the magic clay when it spoke to him. He was glad he never managed to have the clay try to talk to his Mother.

The King kept speaking, "And as I have been racking my brain to come up with a reward fitting your efforts, I find this *very* interesting. Very interesting, indeed. I also noticed, earlier, that you were sculpting a lump of clay you held in your hand into an animal and *bless my eyes* if that little *ferret*, was it?, didn't look so lifelike, so *exactly* like a ferret that one might think it might even be able to *move*. Even be able to, for example, follow people down a *hallway*." At this the King winked at Jack and smiled. Jack wondered how much the King knew. The King's next words only made this less clear.



He looked Jack in the eyes and spoke more like a friend than a King. “Jack, let me tell you an important fact. Anyone can *become* a King. You just need to be born a Prince and, soon enough, you get to be a King. But if one is planning to *stay* a King, one must learn to notice things. And what I have noticed is that you are very good with animals and lumps of clay.”

The King waited for Jack to speak, perhaps hoping for a confession, but still Jack said nothing. Jack was wondering if he were in trouble and knew that trouble only got bigger when you tried to talk your way out of it.

“Now,” said the King. “As I was saying. I had been trying to decide what type of reward would fit the boy who helped rescue my only niece and rid the kingdom of its biggest enemy. And, I thought the best reward would be the one most *fitting*, the one most *suited* to the subject, not simply the most generous. Therefore, I have decided that you and your family can move into my city, choosing one of the finest houses, of course. I know just the one! I will show it to you when we get back. But, most importantly, I plan to place you, my son, in charge of the Royal Zoo. Giving you the title and all the benefits, plus all the responsibilities, as well (Nothing can ever be just *pleasure*, Jack) of the Royal Zookeeper. With a significant salary, of course.”

Jack was thrilled! In the last few weeks, after studying animals so closely so he could learn to make them from clay, he had become truly fascinated by them. He would also, finally, be able to tell his Mother what happened with the magic lump of clay. Not only would she stop being disappointed, she’d likely be very proud.

If this wasn’t a happy ending, then he didn’t know what was.

The King concluded. “I take the look on your face to mean that it’s acceptable. I will have it arranged.” With that the King took his leave and went over to help supervise the return of the belongings.

“Did you hear that, Clay?” asked Jack. But when he glanced over, he saw that the clay sparrow was no longer on his shoulder. Jack looked around and there, perched on top of Thelda’s picture frame, he saw the tiny reddish-brown bird.

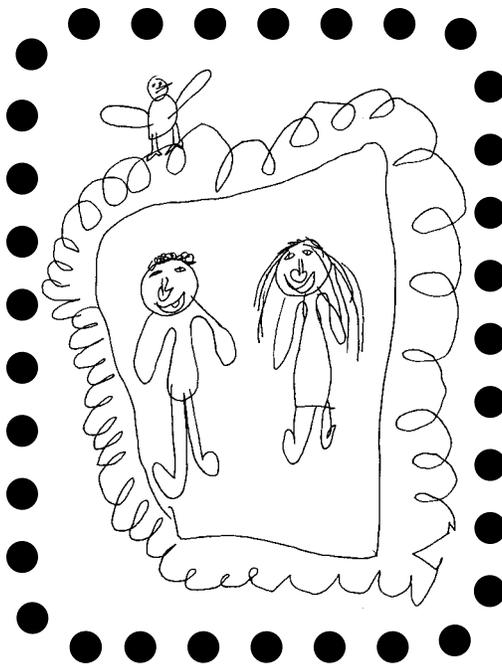
Jack (or should we now call him the Royal Zookeeper?) walked bravely over to the King’s niece.

Without even introducing himself, he tapped Thelda on her velvet-lined shoulder, pointed at the picture frame, and asked, “Who’s the boy?”

With a very sad look on her face, she said, “That’s my brother.”

She looked so sad, Jack decided it could mean only one thing. “Is he dead?” Jack asked.

Thelda’s face quickly turned from sad to angry. “No!” She glared at him. “He’s not dead!” Then she looked very sad again. “Or at least I *hope* he’s not dead. My father did something mean to a witch two years ago and as a punishment she took my brother away. And hid him. We found the witch but nothing we did could make her tell us where she put my brother. We searched her house and all her property, but we never found my brother or anything that belonged to him. Or ... or ...” And here she started to weep, getting the words out in big, slow sobs, “... or ... any clue... that he... might ... still be ... alive.”

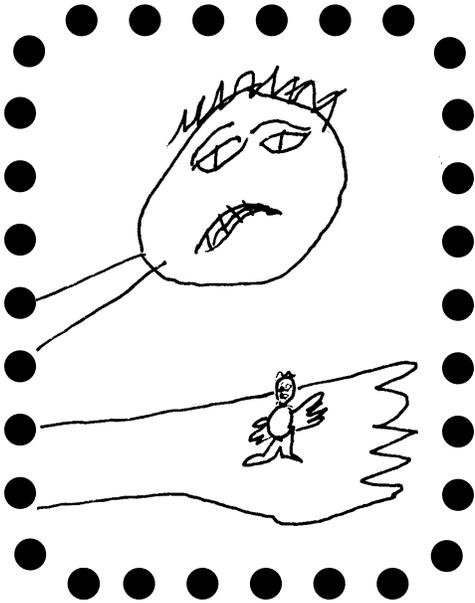


Jack felt sorry for Thelda. He also felt bad about thinking she was a spoiled, rich girl. He asked gently, "What was-, I mean, What *is* his name?" But before she answered, he already knew.

"Clay," she said.

Suddenly, the little clay bird started flying around them both as if it had gone batty. Thelda didn't know what to make of the bird or the fact that this little plainly-dressed boy didn't seem surprised that there was a crazy bird flapping all over the place.

Coyly, Jack said, "I think I just might know where he is." And with that he held out his hand, palm up, for the little clay bird to land upon. Which it did.



Thelda looked both confused and curious. "What are you saying?" But Jack said nothing. She continued, "Are you saying that this little bird is my Clay?"

Jack couldn't help but laugh. "I am saying that this little bird certainly *is* clay. And I think he might be *your* Clay as well."

He handed the bird over to Thelda. When she touched the bird she was surprised.

"It's made of clay!" she exclaimed. "But it acts so real." And suddenly she understood what Jack had been trying to explain. It was her turn to become pale. She asked, in amazement, "The witch turned my brother into a clay bird?"

"I think the witch did the *clay* part," explained Jack. "But *I* did the bird part."

Thelda quickly determined what to do next. "Well, then, turn him back into my Clay."

"Can I?" asked Jack.

"You *must*," she said.

"No, I mean, I'm not sure I'm good enough to make a human being," said Jack.

At precisely the same time, using precisely the same words, and sounding precisely like a sister and brother, both Clay and Thelda assured him, "Of course, you can, Jack."

So Jack took back the clay bird and squeezed it into a lump of clay. (Thelda winced when he did this.) And, slowly, working from the picture and following Thelda's patient directions, he made the clay in his hand into a perfect duplicate of the Clay in the picture. Only much, much smaller. And all reddish-brown, of course.

When he was finished, Thelda exclaimed with glee, "That's him!"

But nothing happened.

The tiny, human-shaped Clay could walk and talk and looked just like the Clay in the picture, but it remained a tiny, human-shaped lump of clay.

This time, it was Clay himself who had the idea. "I'm too young," he said. "I should be two years older now." He gestured his tiny hands towards his tiny body. "I would no longer look like this."

So, together, they made him look two years older. Taller. Broader shoulders. Thinner cheeks. More muscles on the arms and legs. But still nothing happened.

"Maybe make his hair longer," suggested Thelda.

As soon as Jack started pulling the clay hair a little longer, Clay began to grow. Within seconds, Clay grew to be the size Thelda remembered him... and then continued growing for six more inches.

Before she threw her arms around her brother, she declared, “My, how you’ve grown!”

Suddenly there was a huge applause! The three of them, Jack, Thelda and Clay, realized that everyone had stopped collecting their belongings and started watching to see if the lump of clay would become Clay, the King’s nephew.

All the people rushed forward and, both crying and laughing loudly, they lifted Jack and Thelda and Clay upon their shoulders and starting cheering and dancing. They were all so happy and touched that many of them started weeping tears of joy. Even Dirk of the Dark Woods, who was tied up with the other robbers, couldn’t help but wipe a small, happy tear from his one good eye.

The King declared that all of next week would be a holiday. That there would be jousts and dancing and feasts and carnivals and other spectacles that can only happen at the ending of a story like this. The King also declared that Jack and Thelda and Clay would be the three guests of honor for this huge celebration.

And that’s the entire story of *Jack and the Lump of Clay*. All that’s left to do now is to give it an ending. While many things could be said, especially “*They all lived happily ever after*” and “*Jack and Thelda soon married and had many fine children*” the best way to end this story is to use Jack’s own words.

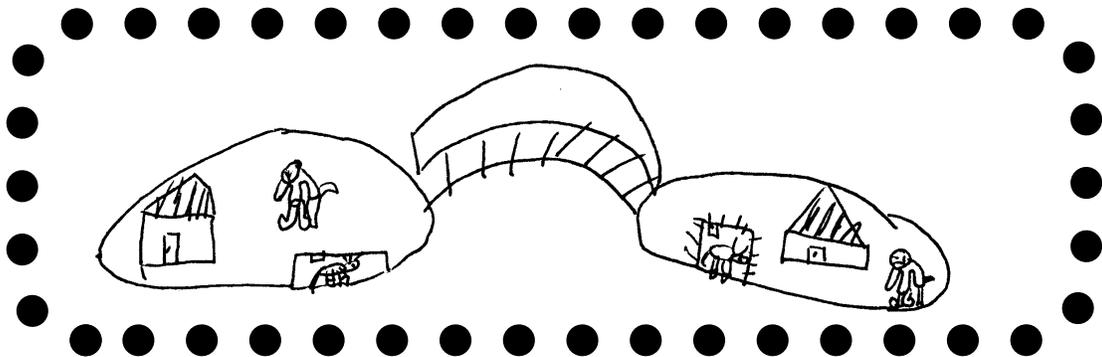
When he and Clay and Thelda were being carried above the heads of the rejoicing people, Jack looked over to Clay and, with a huge smile on his face, yelled, “Now, *that’s* a happy ending!”

--- The End ---

Oh, wait! I almost forgot to tell you what happened to Ethan, the old man who gave Jack the magic clay.

It turns out there was *another* island right next to Ogre’s island. On this island once lived a very rich, but very evil *Troll*. I say ‘once lived’ because Ethan managed to trick the Troll into leaving the island and never coming back. Well, to be fair, Milky did most of the troll tricking and Ethan most of the yelling for help, but either way, the troll was soon gone and they were able to move into the troll’s castle.

After a few days in the castle, with nothing much else to do but count all of the troll’s gold and clean up all of the troll’s mess, they started to get lonely. They looked over to Ogre’s Island and saw that Nate and his cow were also lonely. So, working together, the four of them built a wide bridge between their two islands and now, I can safely say, they’re as rich and as happy as any two old brothers and two cows can be.





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