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Opening extract from
One Dog and His Boy

Written by
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one
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Hal's Birthday

All Hal had ever wanted was a dog.

He had wanted one for his last birthday and for the birthday before, and for Christmas, and now that his birthday was coming round again he wanted one more desperately than ever. He had read about dogs and dreamed about dogs; he knew how to feed them and how to train them. But whenever he asked his mother for a dog she told him not to be silly.

“How could we have a dog? Think of the mess; hairs on the carpet and scratch marks on the door, and the smell. . . Not to mention puddles on the floor,” said Albina Fenton, and shuddered.

And when Hal said that he would see to it that it didn’t smell and would take it out again and again so that it didn’t make puddles, she looked hurt.

“You have such a beautiful home,” she told her son, “I would have thought you would be grateful.”

This was true in a way. Hal’s parents were rich; they lived in a large modern house in the suburbs with carpets so thick that your feet sank right into them and silk curtains that swept to the floor. There were three new cars in the garage – one for Albina, one for her husband and one for the maid to use when she took Hal to school – and five bathrooms with gold taps and power showers, and a sauna. In the kitchen every kind of gadget hummed and buzzed; squeezers and coffee makers and extractors – and the patio was tiled with marble brought in specially from Italy.

But in the whole of the house there was nothing that was alive. Not the smallest beetle, not the frailest spider, not the shyest mouse – Albina Fenton and the maids who came and went saw to that. And in the garden there were no flowers –

only raked gravel – because flowers mean earth and mess.

Although he knew it was silly to go on hoping, Hal decided he would have a last try. Three days before his tenth birthday he got up early and padded across the deep blue carpet, which was going to be replaced in the coming week because blue, his mother said, was out of fashion. He had said he liked blue but his mother had just smiled at him in that rather regretful way which meant that he had said something foolish.

Now he turned off his night light shaped like a flying saucer and wondered why he seemed to sleep just as badly with the flying saucer night light as he had done with the night light in the shape of a skyscraper.

Then he went into his bathroom and washed carefully, making sure that he didn't miss out any bits, and cleaned his teeth extra hard with his electric toothbrush before spraying his mouth with the high-pressure breath freshener fixed to the wall.

He wanted to have everything right before he wrote the note to his mother because it was important. If she took notice of it everything would come right, but if she didn't. . .

So now he sat down at his specially designed writing desk and found a pen and a piece of headed notepaper, because his parents hated anything to be scrappy, and wrote very, very carefully:

“PLEASE CAN I HAVE A DOG FOR MY BIRTHDAY? PLEASE?”

He wrote it out three times because he wanted the writing to be really good – his parents had moved him from his last school because they said he wasn’t making enough progress – and then he padded across the corridor and pushed the note through his mother’s bedroom door. There was no point in writing a note to his father because his father was in Dubai, or perhaps Hong Kong. Or even Tokyo. Hal could never be certain, though he tried very hard to keep track of his father’s business travels. His father was a “frequent flyer” and more often in the air than on the ground.

Albina Fenton, Hal’s mother, was in her walk-in wardrobe, trying to decide what to wear.

“Really, everything’s in rags,” she muttered, passing along a row of glittering evening dresses, then back along a line of tailored suits, opening drawers of frilly blouses and embroidered scarves.