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THE NEWBERY AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR OF *MANIAC MAGEE*



*Space Station
Seventh Grade*

FOOD

ONE BY ONE MY STEPFATHER TOOK THE CHICKEN BONES OUT OF the bag and laid them on the kitchen table. He laid them down real neat. In a row. Five of them. Two leg bones, two wing bones, one thigh bone.

And bones is all they were. There wasn't a speck of meat on them.

Was this really happening? Did my stepfather really drag me out of bed at seven o'clock in the morning on my summer vacation so I could stand in the kitchen in my underpants and stare down at a row of chicken bones?

"Look familiar?" I heard him say.

"Huh?" I said. I wasn't even sure he was talking to me. I wanted to go back to sleep.

He said it again. "Look familiar?"

"What?"

He swept his hand over the bones. "These?"

"What about them?"

"Ever see them before?"

"See what?"

"The bones."

"What bones?"

"*These* bones!" he sort of yelled.

He picked up a leg bone and drummed it in front of my eyes. "I know you did it, Jason."

"Did what?"

He stuck the bone under my nose. I could smell it. "Jason. I *know* you did it."

I called out, "Mom. I'm tired."

My mother sang in from the dining room, "Don't call me-ee—" like I was some stranger.

My stepfather said, "Know how I know it was you, Jason?"

"Me what?" I said.

"You who ate the chicken. *My* chicken. For *my* lunch."

"No."

"I'll tell you then." He counted on his fingers. "One: because it wasn't Mary. She hates chicken." (Mary is my cootyhead sister.) "Two: it wasn't Timmy. He doesn't steal. Yet, anyway." (Timmy is my little brother. He does too steal. My dinosaurs.) "And three and four: it wasn't your mother, and it sure as heck wasn't yours truly."

"Who's that?" I yawned.

He yelled again. "ME!"

"*Hon-ey!*" My mother's voice came floating in all sing-songy. "*Neigh-bors.*"

Was this really happening?

He toned it down again. He pulled the bone away from my nose. He stared at it. He smiled at it. He kissed it. "I would have loved you," he whispered.

I wasn't surprised that my stepfather talked to a bone. Not

only is he a teacher at the community college, but he also does amateur acting. So you never know when he's serious. His name is just right: Ham. It's short for Hamilton, and it describes the way he acts pretty good too.

He went on whispering to the bone: "I would have taken you to lunch today. It would have been beautiful. Delicious. But Jason — ah — Jason did not want us to be together. He did not want me taking you away from home. He wants me to get a fast pickup at the cafeteria, not to mention a nice case of heartburn."

"Can I go back to bed?" I said.

He didn't seem to hear me. He said, "Am I that mean to you?" Silence. "Jason?"

"What?" I said.

"Answer my question, please?"

"I thought you were talking to the bone."

"Answer, please."

"What was the question?"

"Am I that mean to you?"

"What do you mean?"

"Am I a cruel stepfather?" I waited, on purpose. "Well?"

"Nah," I said. "Not really."

"Okay, so" — he put the bone down, put his hands on my shoulders — "what do you think's going to happen if you tell the truth?"

I shrugged. "I don't know."

"Think about it. Seriously." He was being the teacher now. "I'd like to know what's inside your head. Do you think I would string you up against the rafters in the cellar?" I tried to twist away but my shoulders wouldn't move. "Come on, seriously. Is that what you think?"

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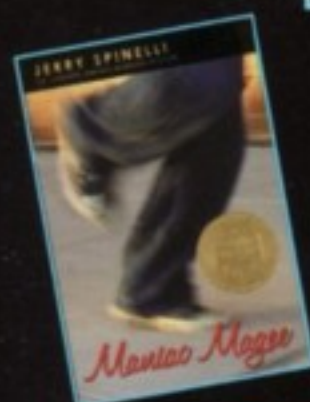
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