On Ezra Jack Keats

Lee Bennett Hopkins

Sometimes it is hard to believe that books *are* by people—people like you and me; sometimes it is hard to conceive that authors and illustrators were children, grew up, experienced the pleasures and pains of any human being.

Having known Ezra as a colleague and friend, I offer some thoughts he shared with me as a preface to these excerpts from his memoirs.

"My Life in Crime" details Ezra's growing-up years in Brooklyn, New York, during the Depression years. He had been drawing since he was four years old, constantly experimenting, even to the point of creating "rare postage stamps."

"Painting" brought to mind a tender tale he related to me:

"I first realized that my drawings meant something when one day I covered our enamel-topped kitchen table with a host of sketches. My mother came in, and I expected her to say, 'What have you been doing?' or 'Get the sponge and wash off that table!' Instead she said, 'Did you do that? Isn't it wonderful?' Rather than washing it off, she covered it with a tablecloth and showed it off periodically to the neighbors and friends who visited her."

Ezra's father, who worked as a waiter at a Greenwich Village beanery, did not give him the same open encouragement; he was painfully aware of how difficult the life of an artist could be. "Occasionally he would bring home some materials—a tube of oil paint or a set of brushes for watercolors—but they all came with a lecture about starving artists," he told me. "Years later after I had grown up, my father suffered a fatal heart attack away from home, and I went to identify him. As part of the procedure, the police asked me to look through his wallet, and I found myself staring deep into his secret feelings. There in his wallet were worn and tattered newspaper clippings about the awards I had won. My silent admirerer and supplier had been torn between dread of my leading a life of hardship and real pride in my work."

I couldn't help but chuckle over "Caldecott." Ezra received the prestigious medal for *The Snowy Day* in 1963, the year Madeleine L'Engle received the Newbery Award for *A Wrinkle in Time*.

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Neither Ezra nor Madeleine could manage eating at the banquet affair. Harry Simmons, at Viking Penguin, Inc., recalled how he and a group of other publisher friends ordered a meal for them that evening which they both ate at a card table in a hotel room.

Ezra's own voice follows.

From *COLLAGE: The Memoirs of Ezra Jack Keats*[1]

Ezra Jack Keats

My Life in Crime

I could draw some pretty good pictures. Just ask the kids on my block—or my mother. Or Mr. Gordon, the candy store man. But what does a guy do with the stuff? I copied a postage stamp from my modest collection preserved in a blank homework book. It came out looking pretty dull, so I decided to create my own stamps—oval, triangular, elongated. I put into them palm trees, tigers, giraffes, and other exotic creatures who inhabited a fabulous world out there, far, far from Brooklyn. With my sister's manicuring scissors, I cut out the serrated edges. To give them a touch of authenticity, I carefully copied the cancellation marks and then smeared the stamps with my dirty fingers.

I decided to impress the guys on my block and picked Cross-Eye Bubbie, who had the most coveted collection in the neighborhood and was considered to be a first-class stamp connoisseur. At the last moment I was overtaken by doubts and decided not to show them in the bright light of day. So I invited Bubbie into my dimly lit hallway and displayed the dazzling additions to my collection.

"Wow," Bubbie gasped. "Where da hell did ya get dese?"

I don't know what possessed me. "A sailor cousin a' mine brought them back from a trip around the world," I said modestly. "A real great guy. He gave 'em to me."

"Wanna swap?" he looked at me hopefully.

"Well—O.K."

He ran home and returned with his fancy embossed stamp album. I struck a bargain with him. Three of his rare ones for one of my masterworks.

"No," I explained. "I wanna keep the rest. I might get a betta deal. Listen, my mother needs me. See ya."

His hands trembled as he inserted the stamps into his album. "So long, Bubbie!" I called as I dashed upstairs, locked the door and ran to the window to peek through the curtains. What had I done?

Out in the street in the daylight, Bubbie saw that he'd been taken by a lousy forger. Bellowing like an ox he made for my hallway, flew up the stairs and banged on my door, yelling foul curses at me, my father, my mother, my sister and my brother. "Yer whole family stinks," he yelled, and promised to inflict on me every physical torture known in the neighborhood. "—And I'll make ya eat dem in front of all da guys, you bastid!" Shaking violently, I suggested through my bolted door that we talk it over. He kept banging and yelling. I slipped the stamps to him under the door. He ran down the stairs cursing. Looking out the window, I saw him disappear around the corner.

Later that day when I dared venture out, I found my beautiful stamps torn to bits, scattered outside my door.

Painting

Black, ominous clouds drift past a ghostly lighthouse, which withstands the churning waves dashing against it. Droplets of oily black ooze from the clouds and drip slowly down the sky, past the horizon, over the sea, and off the canvas.

"I don't know how to stop it," I cry, sweeping a paint-stained rag across the painting.

"Hold it," my mother calls. "I'll be right there."

At my side she gasps. The canvas is an angry swirl of murky grays.

"I messed up again! I'm no damn good! I quit."

"What's the matter with you? Even the greatest artists in the world had trouble like this. You'll do it over right, you'll see!"

"Sure—that's easy to say!"

She casts a glance at the kitchen clock, hurries over to a closet piled high with folding chairs, over-size pots, carpentry tools, and a rusty sled. She reappears with a painting of a three-masted sailing ship plowing through a green sea, its billowing sails reaching high into the sky, done on burlap with house paint and a few tubes of oils the local house painter had given me.

"Tell me—who painted this?" she demands. "Well?"

We gaze at the painting I had copied from a calendar cover.

"How wonderful it must be to paint," she sighs, brushing aside strands of graying reddish hair. "Life is such drudgery. Oh, how I wish I were a man! I'd become a sailor and spend my life at sea visiting all those faraway, colorful places . . ."

A familiar cough from the entranceway downstairs. She turns to look at the clock again.

"It's Pa," she whispers. "Put everything away—quick!"

Paintings, palette, paintbox, brushes, rags, all swiftly disappear under the foot-pedaled Singer sewing machine, draped over with a flower-patterned oil-cloth cover. Not a speck of evidence remains—except for the potent smells of turpentine and linseed oil.

I was just washing up when my father came in, sniffing.

"What do I smell? You'll go blind squintin'. Do you wanna starve like those Bohemians—those gypsies I see every day in the Village? You wanna be a poor slob too, don't you? Well, get the hell out in the street and play ball like the other kids!"

I left them to fight it out.

A few days later, Mr. Gordon, the candy store man, asked me to make a sign for him.

"Kodak Film Developed and Printed Here!
Quick Service—One Week. 20¢"

I lettered it on wrapping paper, adorning it with many fancy touches in red, blue, and orange. The kids hanging around the store gaped when he paid me fifty cents for it. I couldn't keep from grinning.

When my father heard of this, his joy was unrestrained. He worked nights as a waiter and slept days, but he got up a few hours earlier the next afternoon, so we could take a walk and talk man to man.

"Listen," he started, "You're handy with brushes. You did a beauty of a job for Mr. Gordon. Did it ever occur to you that you could own your own sign paintin' shop? Be your own boss? Have your name on the window? Not to worry about askin' for jobs, hat in hand. You understan', don't you?"

"Yeah," I said unenthusiastically.

On the way back we stopped at Mr. Gordon's candy store.

"How's about a coupla egg-creams?" my father suggested. We sat at the counter, sipped egg-creams and discussed business with Mr. Gordon.

"And how's the film business comin' along?" my father asked casually.

"It's a little too early to say—I think it's picking up."

I felt a nudge under the counter.

"Well," my father sighed, "Gotta get back to work." He paid up, and on the way out stopped in front of my sign, beaming as he viewed my work pasted behind the window, against which we saw our reflections.

He breezed into the house a few days later and greeted me breathlessly. "How's the sign paintin' business these days?"

"Nothing new," I reported sleepily over my morning cocoa.

He hung up his coat, sat down at the kitchen table with me, and called my mother over. "Wait'll ya hear this—my boss wants him to paint a sign for the restaurant!"

He took a crumpled piece of paper out of his trousers and read rhapsodically:

"New low prices at Pete's Coffee Pot!
Two Eggs w/Potatoes and Coffee—10¢
Pigs Feet & Sauerkraut—25¢
Pancakes & Sausage—"

"Hurry up with your breakfast, Ezra, you're already late for school. Ben, why don't you talk about it when he gets back—and finished with his homework?"

"Damn it!" My father slammed his notes down on the table. "Don't you interrupt me like that! I know what you two are up to, carryin' on like a couple of lunatics behind my back. It took a lot of talkin' an' braggin' to sell my boss this bill of goods. So you'd better do it—pronto!"

Then to my mother, "An' you butt out! We need every cent we c'n get." He stormed into the bedroom, flung himself onto the bed and fell into a deep sleep, snoring loudly.

I worked on the sign evenings, as carefully as I could. All that strange food!

One morning he came home just as I was about to leave for school. He saw the finished product.

"Beautiful!" he crowed. "B-e-e-utiful! They never had such a fancy sign—believe me. An' ya know what? Bigger and better jobs are comin'—I c'n guarantee it!"

"He asked for and got one dollar, doubling my fee almost overnight.

"This money," he warned me, "has gotta go for sign paintin' stuff, see?"

The following Saturday we went to Greenwich Village to buy brushes and paint, meet his boss and get paid. And of course, to see the sign in its proper setting.

Pete's Coffee Pot, which my father often referred to as "The Restaurant," turned out to be a run-down diner. Outside, a rusting tin cut-out of a coffee pot with Pete's name on it swayed in the wind. Pete was away, so I was introduced to the counter-man, who offered me his boss's regrets and handed me my dollar, plus jelly doughnuts and coffee on the house. As we left we paused in front of my latest creation.

Greenwich Village fascinated me, with its tilted two- and three-story

houses. We passed old, musty, used book shops: Books Bought, Rare Books, Back Number Magazines, Prints, Art Reproductions.

The art supply store was situated between an ancient movie house showing foreign films, and a hock shop. The door shut behind us and we found ourselves in a large, not too well lighted shop. Heavenly chaos. What an array of treasures lay before us! Mysterious odors of canvas, paint, linseed oil, and varnish turned me heady with unbearable hopes. The well-worn wooden floor was jammed with stacks of drawing papers of myriad colors, textures, and thicknesses, rolls of canvas stacked against the walls, canvases already stretched, tight as drums—waiting. Fragile outdoor sketching easels and grand, elaborate ones of rich polished wood, with cranks for lowering, raising and tilting . . .

"Where can we find brushes for making signs?" my father inquired, suddenly intimidated. The puzzled clerk referred us to another, older man, who directed us. We walked toward the far end of the shop, past shelves of jars of powdered pigment, skeletons suspended from the ceiling amidst wooden mannequins, dusty plaster casts of heads, horses, and anatomical figures. I lingered for a moment at displays of seductively curved and polished palettes, arrays of thick pastels, colored pencils, color charts.

I wonder if my father knew how I felt when I saw all those tubes of paint, row after row, inside glass cases, scattered across the counters, gleaming and glistening in different shapes and sizes, fat ones bursting with pigment, others thin and elegant, all wrapped in spell-binding labels displaying every color imaginable. Naples yellow. Cerulean blue. Chrome orange. Emerald green. Mars red. Geo. Rowney—Artist's Oil Colours, Jacques Blockx Fils—Couleurs Extra Fins, Bellini, Pelikan—Öel Farben Für Künstler, Winsor & Newton—Finest Colours, Paillard Couleurs, LeFranc & Bourgeois—

They were like those rows of red glasses with candles they had lit up at church. Votives, I think they call them. If I dared, I'd've thrown myself on my knees and prayed to those tubes!

We finally got to the sign painting brushes.

"Now, which do ya need?" my father asked.

I took a deep breath to speak. Nothing came out.

"We finally found 'em," he scolded. "Wake up."

We pooled our money and got three brushes and some sign painting colors.

"Well," he said, "now you're a regala professional."

On our way out we passed two small identical men, wearing identical battered hats with sweat-stained hat bands, threadbare baggy pants, heads close together, gaunt faces and sunken eyes, conferring in whispers.

I recognized one of them from a self-portrait I had clipped out of a second-hand art magazine. I squeezed my father's arm.

"Look, Pa!" I whispered. "That's Raphael Soyer—and one of his brothers, Isaac, or Moses."

"Who?"

"Raphael Soyer—and one of his brothers. They're famous artists."

He sized up the two baggy look-alikes. "That's famous?"

We left the shop and boarded the El. Our train cast a network of shadows over crowded streets, pushcarts, shops, open windows with women and dogs gazing out, as endless signs streaked past below us. We sat on straw seats viewing the people facing us. At one of the stops a couple entered and sat across from us. They were so unkempt, I couldn't keep from staring at them. This guy hadn't combed his hair for days. He wore a red-checked shirt underneath a rumpled corduroy jacket, and of all things, pince-nez. She had an impressive head of hair, too, and many strings of beads over a loose purple blouse, and a colorful gypsy-like long skirt.

My father nudged me. "See 'em?" he said in a loud voice.

I nodded. I wished he wouldn't stare and speak so loudly. He turned to me and grinned. "He's an artist, and she's his girlfriend. Or model—maybe both."

"No they're not," I whispered. "Why do you say that?"

"Hmmph. Where're your eyes—in the back of your head?" He glanced at me with feigned pity. "Look—in—his—right—pocket," he said slowly and precisely. About a half dozen worn paintbrushes stuck out of his jacket pocket. My gaze fell to his trousers and tattered, paint-spattered shoes. Staring at them brazenly, my father folded his arms across his chest and smiled smugly. Eventually they got off. We rode on in silence.

A few days later, he called me into the kitchen. "See this?" he asked wearily. "A starving artist swapped this for a bowl of soup. It's a good thing the boss wasn't around." He tossed a brand-new tube of oil paint on the table. It lay glistening wrapped in its vibrant orange label. For the next few months my father, it seems, became a "fence" for hungry painters who came to Pete's Coffee Pot and made deals under the counter, and my modest supply increased and so did my reluctance to use them because of the plight of the artist. I opened a tube of pure, gleaming yellow glowing with intense expectancy. I screwed the cap on and opened and closed tubes of green, velvety rich browns, elegant blues, and infinitely black black. I postured with my new brushes this way and that, peering at my reflection in the window. I was startled by what I saw. I looked like a real artist!

Then unexpectedly Pa's questionable activities came to light. My father, the tough guy with those bristling black handle-bar mustachios, who often had to break up desperate fights of water-front toughs who tossed sugar bowls through the diner's windows, overplayed his hand and I found him out.

Weary from the night's work he came home with a rectangular piece of cardboard, on which were fastened five small brushes. I remembered seeing it in Woolworth's! Kids bought them for water-color painting, but those puny hairs would bend, stay bent and promptly fall out. Puzzled, I looked at the reverse side and found the price tag still on it. So—my father who supposedly swapped bowls of soup for costly paints and brushes had really been buying the stuff for me all along—despite his dread for my future. He had to cut back on his spending and took his business to Woolworth's. I kept his secret.

I decided to do a painting of him and Ma. They'd pose just as I knew them around the house. I'd learned something about the use of light and dark from making copies of my favorite painter, Daumier. Through his lighting he both revealed the forms of his subjects and embraced their humanity.

Persuading them to pose wasn't easy. They weren't too proud of what they looked like. Getting my mother to agree was easier. She ran her hands down her apron shyly, glanced at her stained apron and clumsy shoes.

"What? Me?"

We had talked about Daumier and Rembrandt. She liked a reproduction she had seen, so she said yes. But my father remained suspicious. He stood shirtless in his Long John top, suspenders hanging down, draped around his behind.

"Wait a minute," he protested. "How's about a shirt and tie—and a jacket maybe?"

"Pop, those things aren't important. Remember what we saw at the Metropolitan Museum? A lot of those paintings are of plain people."

"I remember George Washington. He dressed nice. And why in the kitchen?" he wanted to know. "How come next to the gas range?"

They posed separately, and when time permitted, together. I brought in a big brown jug I found and painted it into the background.

"What will people think?"

"Don't worry, Ben," my mother whispered, holding her pose faithfully. "Let him do what he has to do."

The three of us viewed the finished canvas. My mother spoke first.

"Nice, very nice. You know, it's really good—don't you think so, Ben?"

"Hmmph—well, it's okay, I guess. But for the same money, couldn't you make us look a little more respectable?"

Friday nights we had our soirees. It was Pa's night off, and Mrs. Lubov, after a long week at work, would visit and play the piano for us. This Friday Mr. and Mrs. Max arrived too. Mr. Max was sober for a change, and Mrs. Max sat proud and smug, tightly corseted, wrapped in her black shawl. She never said a word about his drinking, even as he hocked her last pitiful piece of jewelry for booze and pissed in the street. She always spoke of him as a prince among men. Queen Canute.

My father was in great form and had Mrs. Lubov shrieking with laughter while Mrs. Max, stiff and upright, forced a smile occasionally. Because of Mr. Max's thick glasses I couldn't tell whether he was ogling Mrs. Lubov or just gazing in her direction. She had the men in the room under her spell. Pa told them about starting me out as a sign painter and our trip to Greenwich Village. Of course we heard, to gales of laughter, about the artist and his girlfriend. And about the Soyers.

"And don't forget the painting," my mother put in.

"Painting? What painting?"

"Ezra did a beautiful painting of us," my mother said, adding shyly, "you know, just a picture to show typical, plain people at home."

"A paintin' of youse?" Mr. Max questioned.

She went to the closet and brought it out. "Caught us real as life, didn't he?" my mother asked.

"Why, Ben," Henrietta called playfully, "that's quite a potbelly you've got there. Of course, she added, turning to Mr. Max, "I think every man should have a bit of a pot, don't you?"

"I think," appraising her slowly through his almost telescopic lenses, "I think he should have something more on. Looks like you don't own a shirt, Ben."

Henrietta chuckled, provoking Mr. Max to take another dig at my father. "Wait—what do I see?" He leaned toward the painting with mock interest, shifting his glasses to the tip of his nose. "Hah! What's that jug doin' next ta *you*, Ben?"

"Any jug in *this* house is an empty jug," my father said.

"Personally," Mrs. Max picked up the cudgels, "if you ast me, I'm very disappointed." Oozing superiority and solicitude, she added, "A boy, his parents do what they can for him even if it ain't much, should make anyhow a picture of his parents looking respectable and a little happy instead of a picture of—of—"

Mr. Max jumped up. "A picture of—FAILURE!"

My father's face was ashen. "Well, coming from—" He caught my mother's eye and stopped, still seething.

Ezra Jack Keats. Untitled portrait of the artist's parents, c. 1932. Oil on canvas. Copyright © 1990, The Ezra Jack Keats Foundation.

"Ben," Henrietta tried to patch things up, "Hymie didn't say that you and Gussie were failures, he simply said it was a picture of failure."

"What the hell's such a disgrace about being poor?" I yelled. "Wonderful people are poor. Did you ever hear of Rembrandt? He was a rich, successful artist, but he'd rather paint poor people—and you know what? He died poor! And I'll bet you never heard of Daumier either—well, he loved working people and went blind and broke painting them."

I couldn't stop. "You know why I'm lettering those crappy signs? To get enough dough for paint and canvas. I'm gonna be an artist and paint for those people even if I do starve."

My father was ghostly white.

"Well," said Mrs. Max regally, "I think it's arready time to go." She took her husband's arm and led him out. From halfway down the stairwell we heard him mumbling and grumbling. Then a burst of exchange between them.

"FAILURE!" he growled loudly enough for us to hear. "And his son is a—a—Bolshevik!"

"Shut up!"

For the following long, dormant year sign painting was never mentioned. The portrait of them lay in the closet. My father, bitter with himself for buying me paint, and being lured into posing for that humiliating portrait—and hurt by my pitiless derision by his efforts for a better life for me—wrote me off.

Mrs. Max, long the object of neighborhood gossip, now spread in hushed pious tones to all who would listen her parable of the ungrateful son, his awful painting of his loving parents—and of how her wonderful husband showed what the painting really meant.

My father went to work, came home, slept, read the papers occasionally and spent some time with his few old friends when he could. Sometimes I heard him speaking to my mother; work was harder and harder to find.

"When they see a gray hair, you're finished. Why shouldn't they get a young kid behind the counter, with twice my energy, for the same pay?"

I painted and won prizes and scholarships. There were photos of me and my work in major New York newspapers and the Yiddish press. All our neighbors and relatives knew about it, but when they greeted him with the news, he shrugged his shoulders silently and stared past them. I felt like a closet drunk. What I painted was put away and hidden. Very little talk about art, even with Ma those days. I couldn't afford to use the scholarship. The Depression bore down heavily upon us, and I worked at whatever jobs I was lucky to find.

His bitter, punishing silence became difficult to tolerate, and I began to resent him—even at times hated him and the life in which we were trapped.

Caldecott

I heard a muffled screech behind me, followed by a steady honking. I turned to make out a neighbor in his car gesturing wildly. "Boy, you nearly got run over! What's up, Keats? Want a lift?"

"Yeah, thanks." I bumped my head on the door getting in. "Sorry."

"Where to?"

"Ahh—" I couldn't remember. "—err—Fifty-seventh and Sixth." I sank back, trying to collect my thoughts.

"Well—" I felt a tap on my shoulder. "Here we are! Can you make it getting out?"

I had been going through the motions of living, protected from myself and the world by a steady diet of Seconals. I approached home with a sense of dread, and to defuse the prospect of an empty apartment after dining at the local cafeteria, I took two more capsules to insure a night's repose. Startled awake at three or four in the morning, choking and gasping for breath, I'd pop another, suppressing my inner demons, and fall back into a death-like sleep only to awaken at noon in a drugged stupor.

I tried to drum up work, visiting the art directors of publishing houses, regaling them with endless stories and jokes. It finally got back to me that I was taking too much of their time—that they wished I'd show them my samples or deliver my job and bug off.

One evening I was at Pat's, a friend of mine who lived in a lovely apartment in Greenwich Village. I remember the blue marbleized basin and pitcher, the lace curtains, and her huge gray cat. Her guests seemed to have stepped out of the pages of *The New Yorker*. She introduced me to a thin, balding man with sharp features and small, intense brown eyes, whom I had overheard making caustic, witty observations about the people around us. He asked me what I did. "I'm an illustrator. What do you do?"

"I'm opening a practice as a therapist. Come and see my office—I'd like an artist's opinion of the decor."

I figured he'd appreciate my experience with Dr. Schwitter, and told him my story.

"Oh God—I know her. Heard her speak. Shrill voice. She says she gets great results with criminals. Screams at them a lot."

"No kidding? She told me she gets great results with artists."

"Ahh—so you need therapy? Say, listen—why don't you sign up as my first patient?"

"No thanks. No dough."

"I'll give you bargain rates."

"I've had enough of therapy. But okay, I'll tell you what—I'll try the bargain rates. Just to talk to you about my problems—as friends, I mean. I really need someone to talk to. How does the arrangement strike you?"

"Well—let's make an appointment. Then we'll play it by ear."

I arrived in his small, tastefully decorated office. I started by talking to him as a friend, and poured my heart out, only to discover that I had become his patient.

The treatment over the following years was stormy, often violent and always unorthodox. He sneered at my work, shaming me for imitating other illustrators. He insisted that there was someone inside my body that I didn't know about, who had no connection whatsoever with those illustrators. He scorned my clinging rigidly to the rules and regulations which I believed governed art. He pulled the rug from under me—I didn't know where the hell I was. I peeked out like a wet chick from a freshly broken eggshell—and I was forty. I fought him and ran away and came back, only to find myself back on his torture rack, being jeered at. But in many ways he was brilliant. I was alternately fascinated and furious. Why I stayed on I couldn't understand—but I did. We continued to insult each other in that cauldron of improvisation, scorn, and traditional therapy applied in his unique way—a sort of alchemy.

One day, while walking through the Museum of Natural History, doing research for an illustration, I entered a hall containing great, looming, majestic totem poles. People, sprung from the soil, had drawn from the core of the earth, and all the living creatures upon it, a faith which expressed and confirmed something I had carried within me and didn't know it. What had once been immense trees in a forest were now transformed into figures rising above figures, spiritually sustaining and nourishing each other. I was struck by their authority and silent choreography, and forgot entirely about my assignment, spending the rest of the afternoon lingering on in the room until the attendant reminded me that it was closing time.

"I believe in God," I told Herb at my next session.

"Uh huh."

"In some crazy way, when you pulled my crutches from me, I did discover something inside of me, and it connected with something else."

"Okay." No other comment.

During my treatment, the more I was forced to rely on my inner self,

the more I found myself searching for hidden religious streams. "You know, Herb, I think that if we could find a ritual, a dance to which we could all give ourselves, we could come out at the other end cured."

"Okay, but in the meantime we'll work on you and your dreams, and overcoming your fears. Wait a minute—" He left the office and returned with a stepladder. "Now—climb this ladder—to the very top." I took each shaky step up, sweating. "Stand on top of it—come on—that's right. Stand there! For Christ's sake, stop shaking. Relax, man. Now jump! JUMP!" I jumped and landed with my legs stiff and rigid and left the office limping with pain. Soon I discovered that I could stand up there with considerable ease. "This experience'll give you insights into yourself which might take years of talking." Maybe it did.

I joined a swimming class and baffled the poor instructor. Standing in water up to my hips, I trembled. Whoever thought of swimming? You want to be an artist? Then you struggle and paint and paint and paint. The instructor turned me over to the head of the school, who did only a little better with me. That weekend, my girlfriend Fanny and some friends and I drove out to the country to spend the day wandering through shady brown-green woods. The drive home took a couple of hours. She reclined in the back seat, her lovely head on my lap, looking up at me. I'll never forget her beautiful black eyes, loving eyes. We rarely said a word to each other. The following morning I was back at swimming class. No nervousness. I followed the instructions without trembling. "What happened, Mr. Keats? You must have practiced all weekend—you're not nervous and you're doing so much better. Who've you been working with?"

I told Herb about it. I said, "You know, I think sometimes love can be better than therapy."

"Hmmph—let's get on with the session."

One snowy night some friends and I reminisced about the fun we had as kids when snow transformed the city. White, silent manna from heaven. We jumped and rolled in it. Ate it. Built and attacked each other's fortresses, pelting each other with snowballs, some feather-light, leaving splashes of gentle snowflakes, others so tightly packed and well aimed they left us stung and reeling. I thought I would do a book about it. "If I do, I'll dedicate it to you guys."

Then began an experience that turned my life around—working on a book with a black kid as hero. None of the manuscripts I'd been illustrating featured any black kids—except for token blacks in the background. My book would have him there simply because he should have been there all along. Years before I had cut from a magazine a strip of photos of a

little black boy. I often put them on my studio walls before I'd begun to illustrate children's books. I just loved looking at him. This was the child who would be the hero of my book.

I approached the project with total innocence, unaware that my preconceptions about the rules of illustrating had disappeared. I'll use a little collage, I thought. I discovered patterned papers—some from Sweden, Italy, Japan, America. For the opening page, where he awakens in bed, I'd use gray pastel paper to simulate linen. I dropped into the art supply store and before I could make my request, the clerk came over to me with a roll of Belgian canvas. "We've just received this," he said. "Isn't it a beaut?" I hadn't painted in oils in years. Why was he showing it to me? It *was* linen! Why use paper? I bought a narrow strip, leaving an astonished clerk wondering about what strangely shaped painting I was planning. Day by day I cut out rectangles of red, yellow, orange and purple paper and pasted them down. They became buildings. With a roller I spread white and pastel paints, blues, greens, and yellows, on a large sheet of paper. It turned into snow. From this I cut out shapes of hills; they became snow piled up in the city. I cut out a red snowsuit and pasted a brown oval on it for a head. It became Peter, my character, walking, crunch, crunch, crunch through the snow! Every day, effortlessly, the book grew in new ways. I was like a child playing, discovering that a thing like a piece of red paper can become a boy in a snowsuit. Magic. I wasn't surprised. I was in a world with no rules. As in a dream, everything fell into place. I carved geometric snowflake patterns from erasers, dipped them into pastel pinks and greens and blues and stamped them on blue paper, and snowflakes fell. One day, the book was finished. It was totally different from anything I'd ever done. But I wasn't surprised. When my artist friends saw it, they asked me who had done it.

"Me."

They found it hard to believe.

I don't think I will ever experience again a dream of such innocence—and awaken to find the book finished.

Had this been an accident? I tested myself and tried again. Another book emerged. And another and another. Children knew that squares of colored paper were buildings and that torn pieces of white bond paper became snow piled up on a gate, or that a rectangle of tan was a carton. Adults wrote in in praise of the books. Children sent marvelous letters and astonishing drawings, many of them in collage.

A most peculiar surprise was to follow. Before doing *The Snowy Day* I had been illustrating for publications as diverse as *Collier's, Reader's Digest, Esquire,* and *Playboy.* At the time *The Snowy Day* was published,

I had done an illustration for a Herbert Gold story and received a check from *Playboy* for more than my bill. I called Chicago and explained this to the art director's secretary. She promised to get back to me that day. That afternoon my phone rang. "Long distance from Chicago calling." A woman's voice came through. "Mr. Keats?"

"Yes?"

"Are you sitting down?"

"Huh?"

"I have wonderful news for you. Your book *The Snowy Day* has won the Caldecott Award."

I had never heard of the Caldecott Award. I thanked her.

"Would you like to make a statement?"

Hmm. This seemed to be quite an award. "Well, I'm certainly happy for the little boy in the book."

"Oh, my. How touching. I'll always remember what you said. Please convey my best wishes to your family. Your *Snowy Day,* we all believe, will be a landmark in children's books."

"Thank you for the kind and generous things you've said."

"We must ask you, however, not to mention this announcement until it's released to the press."

"I promise," I said.

Shortly after her call, another came in from Chicago. This one from *Playboy.* "My boss liked the drawing, and felt it was worth more. There was no mistake—so enjoy!"

I tried to keep my promise to Ruth Gagliardo, who had broken the good news to me. I began asking my friends in the field, "What's the Caldecott Award?"

"Are you kidding? It's the greatest award in America that you can receive."

"It's awarded to the best book in the country for that year, selected by the American Library Association. If you win it, everyone in the field will know your name."

Floating way up there in space, I was snapped out of my euphoria when my editor informed me that I'd have to deliver an acceptance speech. To 1800 librarians and teachers! I'd always been nervous telling a story, even to half a dozen friends. Nearly two thousand people! What had they done to me? I pleaded with my editor to make the speech for me.

"Impossible. It's never been done."

"Please, there's always a first time."

"You must make it yourself. They've selected your book. Don't worry. They'll all love you, no matter what happens!"

No matter what happens? I hadn't thought about that. Would I faint? Cry in front of all those people?

"I can't do it. I refuse."

The publisher dropped into my editor's office while I was pleading with her, wringing my hands in supplication. She explained to him what was going on.

"I sure know how you feel, Ezra. Last week I had to address a large gathering at a women's club. As I stood on the podium before the mike, I became aware of a strange thudding sound in the room. I waited for it to subside before beginning to speak, when I discovered that it was my knees knocking against the podium."

I told Herb about my great dread. I'd enroll in a Dale Carnegie Course in Public Speaking.

"Bullshit!"

"Why? I'll get practice speaking to the class and all kinds of pointers on technique."

"Man, you want more pointers and crutches again. No dice. You've got what it takes, and you'll do it."

I finally told my friend Brinton Turkle about the award and the speech. He was a Quaker who lived in an old-fashioned Quaker boarding house and often invited me to dinner there. Each table in the dining room sat about six people. When I finished eating, I asked my dinner companions if I might read my speech to them. Kind and indulgent, they sat quietly as I stood up and haltingly read my eight-minute speech. They responded with tempered but encouraging applause. I took my bows and appeared a couple of weeks later to repeat my performance.

Finally—Chicago. I wandered around the city in a daze. If not for a friendly young editor who recognized my state and who offered to talk with me and help me cross the streets, I might never have made it to the banquet. Seated at the dais I stared, frightened, at a sea of people. Food was served, but I had no appetite and barely touched it. The huge dining room buzzed with conversation and laughter. The lights dimmed, a bright spotlight focused on the doorway in the rear. Two waiters emerged, carrying long poles on top of which were immense gold-plated replicas of the Caldecott and Newbery Medals. They twirled the poles as they wove through the tables, spotlights following them, greeted by stormy applause. I popped half a Valium in my mouth and swallowed hard. I was introduced and suddenly was up there speaking. I had decided to read my speech in record time and get it over with before disaster struck. Then I heard my voice. It was *my* voice so I slowed down to a normal pace and finished my speech. Applause. I bowed and sat down. During

intermission I ran to a phone and called Herb. "I did it, Herb! I did it. I made the speech without a hitch."

When I got to my room that night and got undressed, I noticed a spot of blood on my briefs. The strain had been great.

I entered Herb's office on a note of triumph, relating all that had happened to me, and in passing, mentioned that I had taken half a Valium.

"Schmuck," he shouted. "You had to screw things up, didn't you? You could've done it without turning to some drug for help. The Valium didn't even get a chance to work before your speech was over."

"So I did it on my own, didn't I? Why don't you congratulate me on doing it on my own? No, you're the one who's crapping all over what I did."

"I'm not going to let you weasel out of facing up to things."

"I'll face up to things better if I can incorporate whatever I do achieve."

And so it went. He continued to be scornful when I did an illustration that was less than the best I could do. Confused and angry, I often stormed out. But wasn't he helping me? I would call from a street phone and come back to finish the session. He was generous with his time, but how about something like love or warmth? More running away and more phone calls from street corner phone booths. "You want the approval from me that you didn't get from your Mama. I won't let you ease up or quit before you make it all the way."

"All I want is acknowledgment for what I do, to fortify me to go ahead."

His scorn was scorching and, I felt, far outbalanced any grudging and sometimes gratuitous approval. A few more years of this and I felt it had become counterproductive, and I quit. I'll never know who was right. I owe him much. "Beware a therapist's zeal," I was once told.

I wondered how long I had had the strip of photos of the little boy. I contacted the magazine and was informed that I'd clipped them out of a page twenty years ago. During that time I had moved many times, discarding much. Three years in the army. A year painting in France. More moves. And Ilona, decline and pills, demoralization. To this very day I still have him, and look at that wonderful kid whom I had discovered over forty years ago.

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