

## **The Closet and the General**

**by Grant Metzger**

Once upon a time not unlike our own, there was a city. The city was full of very tall buildings and the buildings were full of very small rooms and in these rooms lived a great many people. In one of the millions of tiny rooms lived a young boy named Calvin. Calvin, at heart, was an adventuresome spirit, a personality that did not mix well with the tiny apartment he lived in with his stepmother, stepsisters, and sometimes his father.

Calvin's stepmother was a squat toad of a woman who detested him greatly and liked nothing better than to call him ugly names and feed him week-old porridge. There were no teeth in the stepmother's mouth, and whenever she smiled all Calvin could see was a great black space and her forked tongue. Calvin had never seen a toad with a forked tongue before, so he assumed his stepmother must be a very special breed of toad. Though he never asked her this directly since he felt no obligation to compliment her in any way.

Where their mother was fat and wide, the stepsisters were the polar opposite. They were very tall and very skinny, with pointed faces like those of a rat Calvin had seen in the picture books his father used to give him. The stepsisters even had whiskers, thin lines of hair branching from beneath their twitchy noses. When they weren't jabbering away to each other in their high, nasal voices about who liked so-and-so and what was in and what wasn't, Calvin's stepsisters took great pleasure in poking and prodding and screaming and yelling at him until he would hide underneath his bed. Sometimes, when they were feeling especially nasty, they would lock him in a closet until someone forgot he was in there and let Calvin out by accident.

Today was one of those unfortunate days when Calvin's stepsisters were feeling especially nasty and Calvin was especially vulnerable, perched as he was in a precarious headstand. Calvin, concentrating all his efforts on remaining aloft, did not hear his stepsisters creeping up on him until it was too late. They toppled him over, squealing with delight as Calvin rolled around on the floor like a beetle on its back. Then, one grabbing ahold of his feet, one his wrists, they hoisted him into the hallway and towards the closet. Before Calvin could so much as protest, the two stepsisters had heaved him into the closet, slamming the door behind him.

The entire kidnapping had been carried out so swiftly that it took Calvin a moment to realize where he was. When he noticed the dark, cramped room he was in and the locked door, Calvin wasn't one bit pleased. He had read somewhere, or maybe it was a dream, that children, if left in dark places for exceptional lengths of time, could begin to experience alarming physical changes, like growing mouse ears or sprouting mushrooms for hair. Calvin was quite fond

of his ears, and he didn't much like mushrooms, so it was no surprise that he was in a considerable amount of distress.

Then he noticed the crab. Now, Calvin wasn't a marine biologist, but he was practically certain that crabs did not usually appear in urban environments. Despite what science would say to the contrary, the small crustacean seemed quite at home in the closet. It sat in the middle of a tiny beam of light that had crept its way under the door, as though sunning itself on the beach where it belonged.

Calvin leaned in for a closer look. The crab watched him for a moment with its stoney black eyes, then moved its claw back and forth, as though it were waving to him. Calvin waved back. At the movement, the crab scurried away, deeper into the closet. Calvin hurried after it. Now and then he would catch sight of the crab again as it scuttled back and forth across the floor. Calvin was so captivated by the crab that he never realized he should have bumped his head against the wall a long time ago. It wasn't until he felt something soft and squishy beneath him and heard the odd sound of moving water that he looked up and noticed he wasn't in the closet any more, at least not any closet he had ever been in during a previous captivity.

Calvin had somehow arrived in a place that looked very much like a beach, but was confused about the positioning of the ocean, which stretched above him, forming a tunnel of sorts. Waves formed, rushing down to meet him, then crashing upwards again into the liquid ceiling. Fish of every color and variety swam beneath the water, sometimes jumping down towards him until they were pulled back up and into the ocean. It was a most distracting sight.

When Calvin came to his senses, he noticed a little black window behind him. Perhaps that was where he had come from, he wondered. After several brief moments of consideration, Calvin decided not to go back into the closet and stay here, wherever here was.

"Helloooo comrade," piped a very small voice. Calvin looked up to see a small, peculiar-looking bird with three heads flying circles above him. The voice had come from the middle head, which looked very excited to see him. The other two heads stared sullenly at the first.

Calvin said hi back.

"You must be Calvin," said the bird, swooping a little lower. Calvin nodded. "Ahh, yes, I thought so. The crab told me all about you," he added after a moment as though explaining himself.

Before Calvin could ask about the crab, a massive red crustacean scuttled out the side of the ocean tunnel, plopping heavily onto the sand. It was identical to the crab in the closet, except much larger.

Despite its massive pincers and couch-sized carapace, the crab seemed a most agreeable creature; so Calvin was not at all alarmed by its sudden appearance. In fact, the appearance of the elephant-sized beast only had the effect of further increasing his wonderment and excitement to have found such an enjoyable world at the back of his closet. By now Calvin had almost convinced himself that perhaps all closets were as wonderful as the one he was currently exploring, and for the first time, his closet prejudices were beginning to weaken.

The crab scuttled towards him, water sliding off its slick back as it moved. When it reached Calvin, the crab did a sort of sideways dance, turning to face him, blinking its beady black eyes with cow-like dolefulness.

“He wants you to climb on his back,” chirped the bird.

Calvin happily obliged, grabbing ahold of the crab’s shell and pulling himself up and onto its back. He gave the crab a pat on the side, already pretending to be a knight upon his trusty steed—and they were off.

“So, the crab says you come from the Land of the Many Faces,” said the bird, who had landed on Calvin’s shoulder and began to pluck vainly at its feathers.

Calvin replied that he didn’t know where the Land of Many Faces was, but if the crab had said Calvin was from there, he expected he must be.

Calvin inquired where they were going.

“Oh, to meet the General of course. Stop, stop it both of you!” The bird’s rebuke was directed at its two other heads, who had begun to quarrel over something.

Calvin asked if they ever spoke.

“No,” said the bird, “Left and Right were cursed by the General in his infinite wisdom. Cursed never to speak again after offending his noble sensibilities. But no need to dwell on such dreary drama for long. Here is the end of the tunnel!”

They had emerged from the water tunnel at the foot of a great volcano. Nearby, a staircase hewn into the rock ascended the side of the volcano. The stairs appeared to go on forever, or at least, a very great distance up into the sky.

Calvin asked the bird if the General was at the top of those stairs.

“Of course he is,” replied the bird, “but you must go alone; the crab and I are not allowed to be in his presence.”

Calvin was disappointed that they would not come all the way with him, but he didn’t argue. Instead, he slid off the back of the crab and thanked them both for their help. Then he made his way towards the stairs alone.

The stairs, Calvin soon found out, were designed in a most odd manner. They appeared to have been made by someone who frequently crafted stairs several sizes too big for humans. Consequently, Calvin had a world of trouble

walking in any way that felt natural to him, so he ascended the volcano in a series of awkward hopping motions and flailing of arms.

About halfway up he noticed a little cave. The entrance was low, so low in fact, that Calvin had to duck his head to get inside. The floor was slick with water and slime, and thick with an odor Calvin felt reminded him a little too much of week-old oatmeal. He had no guess however as to how a smell of that nature would come to be in a small cave in the side of a Volcano.

At first, there appeared to be nothing remotely remarkable about the cave. In all honesty, after traveling through a water tunnel with a giant crab and a three-headed bird, the cave was quite drab in comparison. Then Calvin noticed the puddle, or more correctly, the fish in the puddle. The fish, who looked just like any other fish Calvin had ever had the pleasure of meeting, sat in the middle of a puddle of water at the end of the cave. Understandably, the fish appeared very glum, as most fish do not belong in caves, or puddles for that matter.

Calvin asked the fish if he was the General.

The fish didn't reply, but instead managed to convey with his fishy features that, "No, he was not the general; the General was further up the mountain." The fish ended its facial reply with a facial sigh.

Calvin, who was feeling sad for the fish, asked it if it liked the puddle.

The fish, twisting its body in a sad floppy motion, told Calvin how, "No, he preferred to swim in the ocean, thank you."

By now Calvin, who was feeling quite depressed by the fish's sad features and droopy eyes, asked the fish if he would like to come with him to the top of the volcano to meet the General. His question seemed to excite the fish, who began to swim happy circles around his puddle until he replied that, "Yes, he would like to come with Calvin."

Calvin, delighted to make a new friend, picked up the fish and placed him in his pocket. Then he began to make his way up the volcano again. As they travelled, the fish told Calvin, through his many complex expressions, how he had come to be in the cave. Though Calvin didn't catch all of what the fish had said, as he was concentrating on not falling off the path, he did see enough to understand that the fish had once been a newt, until he had displeased the General who had turned him into a fish as punishment. The fish now hoped to either exact revenge for the wrongs the General had done to him, or convince The General to turn him back into a newt.

After a great deal of time, Calvin found himself at the top of the volcano. The space was much larger than he had imagined. He was also surprised to see a hut at the far end of the volcano.

“That’s where the General lives,” gestured the fish. Calvin nodded, heading towards the little hut.

There was a man outside, resting on a hammock. At first he appeared to be sleeping, but Calvin soon noticed that the man kept fluttering his eyelids as though he were sneaking peeks at Calvin and the fish.

Calvin asked the man if he was the General.

The man, yawning greatly as though Calvin had woken him up after a very long nap, opened his eyes blearily. When he noticed the fish, the man frowned, clearly displeased that it had finally managed to catch up with him.

“Yes, yes I am,” said the man finally. Then with more grandeur and pomp, “Yes, I am the General. Why do you ask?”

Calvin couldn’t strictly remember why he had been looking for the general. He did know however that this information could not be the correct response. So instead, he told the general how his sisters had locked him in the closet and that he had come with the crab and the bird through the water tunnel where they left him to walk up the volcano until he found the fish, who came with him the rest of the way.

“I see,” replied the General very wisely. The General looked to be middle aged. He had the distinctive appearance of a tourist attempting to appear native, and was dressed in a faded floral shirt and khaki shorts. The man’s hair was struggling to decide whether to disappear or turn grey, and he had a clear beer belly as well. All in all, Calvin was finding it hard to believe that this was the great and terrible man who had cursed the bird and turned the fish into his current form.

“So you have come to seek your fortune?” continued the General, stroking his chin thoughtfully.

Calvin told him he had come because the bird had told him to and the fish wanted to be a newt again. At Calvin’s last remark, the fish shook its fin angrily at the General.

The General ignored both Calvin and the fish, standing and walking slowly towards the mouth of the volcano.

“What is it that you truly desire?” The General asked in most wise tones.

Calvin said he didn’t know, but the fish wanted to be a newt again.

“Ah, so you have not yet realized your destiny,” sighed the General, shaking his head at the great tragedy of it all. “Come, stand by me,” he said, beckoning Calvin over.

Calvin obliged, standing at the lip of the volcano next to the older man. For a long time the General didn’t say anything, merely watching the molten magma bubble and churn far below them.

Finally, he said, “Calvin, you see, I am a very wise man. None has ever had more wisdom than me and none ever will. I am the wisest of all men, and wiser than the wisest man you may know. So when I tell you I know exactly what you want, there is clearly no way that I can be wrong.” Then the General belched and scratched at his chest.

“Since it seems you doubt my wisdom,”—Calvin had never said any such thing—“I will grant you one wish.” He handed Calvin a piece of paper and a stubby pencil, “to write your wish on,” explained the General. Calvin thought for a moment, then scratched out his wish on the piece of paper. When he had finished, the General nodded solemnly at him, and gestured towards the volcano, “Toss it in.” Calvin did.

“Now, when I return you home, you will appreciate my full glory when not two good things happen to you, but one.” Calvin didn’t see how one good thing was better than two, but he guessed it was better than nothing. Besides, he would probably get nothing if he offended the general, so he didn’t say anything. “Why will the miracle be so amazing? Well, it will mean I am truly what I say I am, because I will have picked the same thing you wrote down on the piece of paper. Do you understand?”

Calvin nodded.

“Good. Very good. Most good,” said the General, nodding his head in a most wise manner. “Now, I must return you to the Land of Many Faces!” bellowed the General magnificently and snapping his fingers with unnecessary flourish. Nothing happened so the general was obliged to snap his fingers again. The second time everything went dark for the tiniest moment, then Calvin appeared back in the closet again.

Calvin was slightly perturbed to find himself back at square one. Then the door was pulled open and he saw the face of a girl, a pretty, delicate face he had never seen before. The girl smiled brightly when she saw him, grabbing his hand and pulling him out of the closet.

“It’s okay, Mom!” she called. “We found Calvin. He was in the closet!” The girl dragged Calvin into a bright kitchen where he found another girl, with an equally pretty and kind face. Nearby a woman was sliding a pan of bread into the oven.

“Oh, there you are Calvin. We were starting to get worried,” said the woman, kissing him on the head. The other girl smiled as though she was genuinely happy to see him.

The door opened and in came a man carrying a briefcase. Calvin recognized his father immediately.

“Hello Calvin,” his dad said, leaning down to tousle the boys hair. Then his father walked into the kitchen and kissed his wonderful wife and hugged his two sweet daughters. Calvin smiled, then went to join his family for dinner.

A week later a package arrived at the door of the apartment addressed to Calvin. Calvin opened it and found a new bike inside. He wondered where it had come from.