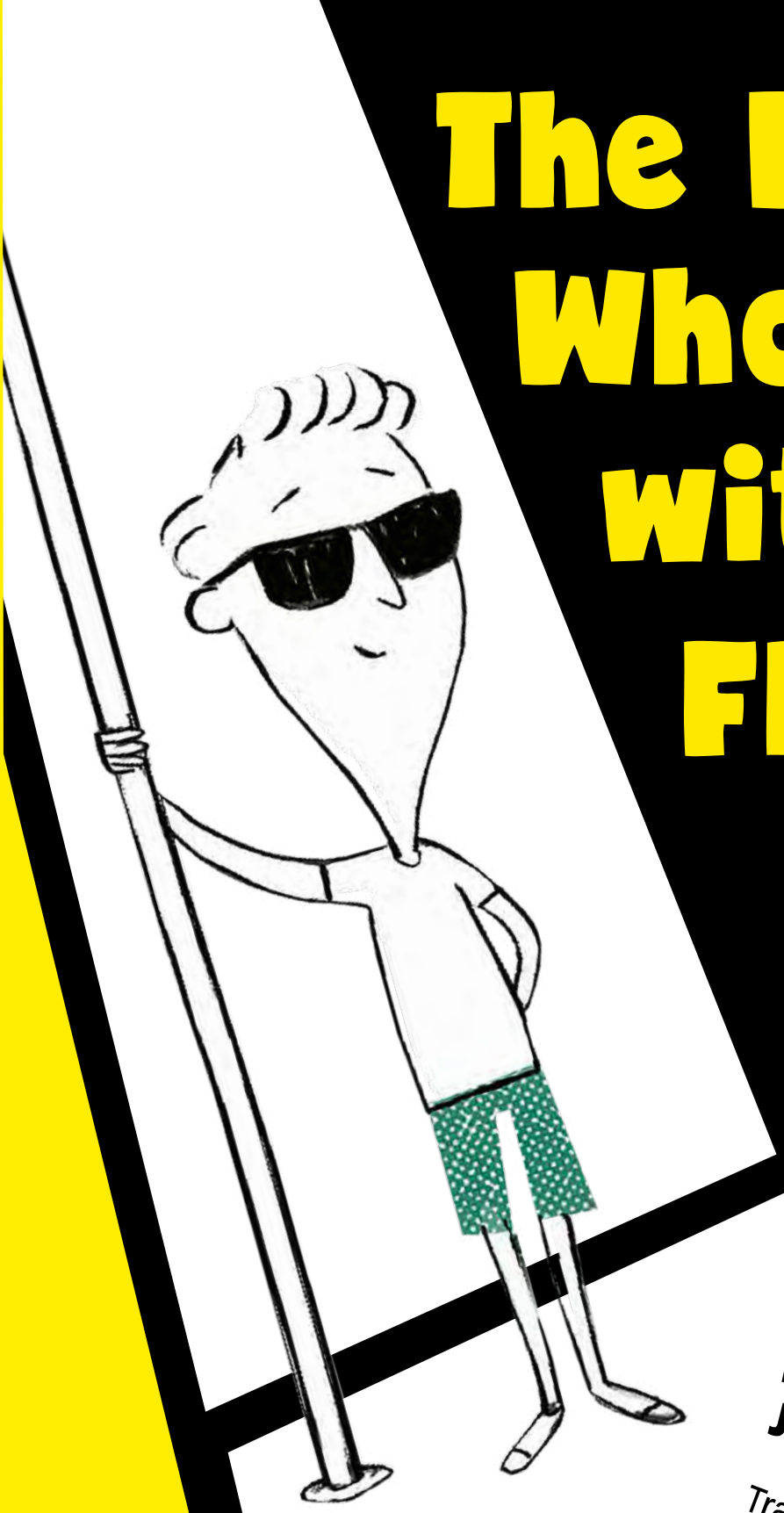
The BOY Who SEES with His FINGERS



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O Kamilu, który patrzy rękami

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Auntie Knows Best

"Auntie Helena is coming for lunch on Sunday," said Mom.

"Oh no," groaned Dad, Zuzia, and Kamil. Even Loopy sighed heavily. On Sunday, Auntie Helena arrived with Uncle Kazik, who was always repeating, "Quite right, Helena." He was a dreadful bore.

"My poor unhappy child!" cried Auntie Helena as soon as she saw Kamil, and then hugged him so hard he thought he'd suffocate. It's just that he can't see, that's all. I wonder what Auntie would do if Kamil were to say something rude to her. He wouldn't say anything out loud, but sometimes he thinks mean thoughts in his head because she treats him like a helpless baby.

Auntie Helena sat down on the sofa, right next to Kamil.

"Kami dear, let me feed you a nice little spoonful of soup!" boomed Auntie Helena.



"Quite right, Helena," said Uncle Kazik, drowning out Kamil, who was trying to explain that he was perfectly capable of feeding himself. But it was no good—Auntie Helena shoved the spoon into his mouth.

"One for Mommy!" she said. Kamil screamed because the soup was very hot.

"One for Daddy!" And another spoonful of boiling hot soup landed in Kamil's mouth. But the heat was unbearable, so he spat it out! Straight onto Auntie Helena's dress.

"Ow!" she shrieked.

"Quite right, Helena," said Uncle Kazik.

"He's scalded me!" screamed Auntie Helena. "He's ruined my dress!"

Kamil was sorry, but what could he do? He wasn't going to lick the soup off her dress, was he? His parents apologized to Auntie Helena, while Zuzia secretly giggled, and Uncle Kazik ate his soup, blowing on every spoonful.

Auntie Helena went into the bathroom to clean herself up. When she came back, she stood rooted to the spot. Kamil was eating his soup without any help at all.

"He's eating it!" she cried.

"Otherwise he'd die of hunger," said Dad.

"But he's doing it on his own! He'll scald himself!"

"It has never happened before," said Mom.

"Whaaat?" screamed Auntie Helena. "But a short while ago he scalded ME!"

"Quite right, Helena," said Uncle Kazik with his mouth full of soup.



✳

"Don't worry, Kami," said Mom when the guests had gone. "You didn't do anything wrong. Quite the opposite. Auntie Helena won't be in a hurry to visit us again."

"High five, Kami!" cried Zuzia joyfully.



An Attack on the Road

On Sunday, the whole family went out on a bike ride. Mom rode one bicycle, Dad rode another, and Zuzia and Kamil rode a third. That sort of bike, for two people, is called a tandem.



Zuzia sat in front, pedaling and steering. Kamil sat behind, pedalling but not steering. He held onto the fixed handlebars with both hands and was very happy. Especially when Zuzia shouted, "Hey Kami, step on the gas! Let's overtake Mom and Dad!"

They pressed harder on the pedals, and at once Mom and Dad were left behind. And so was Loopy, who wasn't riding a bike, but running alongside. What a pity—maybe he'd have preferred to cycle? But no one had asked him what he thought.

So Zuzia and Kamil left their parents behind. Though not very far because they were riding along a road through the woods and fields and wouldn't have known how to get home on their own.

"I can smell manure," said Kamil.

"Yuck!" replied Zuzia because she could smell it too. As well as the stench of a cowshed and a pigsty. "There must be a farm near here!"

They rode up a small hill, and then Zuzia saw a country house. There were cows grazing in a meadow. They picked up speed because now they were going down the hill. Then suddenly . . .

"Kami, there's a big dog running toward us!" cried Zuzia. "I'm scared."

"Where's he coming from?"

"Over there," she said, pointing.

"But Zuzia, I can't see!"

"From the right!"

"Put on the brakes!"

They stopped the bike. Kamil jumped off to the left side of it, and grabbed both handlebars.

"The bike is our shield! It'll protect us from the dog!"



Zuzia got off the bike and stood behind it, just like her brother.

Quick as lightning, the dog raced up to the bike. It was trying to bite the children, but it couldn't reach them.

"It's coming around the side!" cried Zuzia. "Turn the bike!"

Kamil took a step forward. Once again, the bike barricaded them from the dog.

Just then, Mom and Dad rode up the hill.

"Run, Loopy!" cried Dad, pressing the pedals with all his might.

Loopy shot off like an arrow. But before he could reach the children, a man appeared from behind the grazing cows. He shouted sharply at the growling dog, which tucked its tail between its legs and trotted off toward the cows.

*

"Bravo, Zuzia!" said Dad. "You thought up an excellent defense."

"It wasn't me. It was Kami."

"In that case, bravo, Kami! I'm proud of both of you. As a reward I'm taking you for ice cream. Once Mom has finished making her point."

Mom was standing in front of the big dog's owner, shouting and waving her hands.

"Pity she's so far off," muttered Zuzia. "I can't see the faces she's making."

"Then you're in the same boat as I am," said Kamil.

Zuzia gazed at the meadow, the house, and the sky. . . .

"Almost," she said.

Hurry Up, Kid!

One sunny day lots of people went to the lake to swim and to sunbathe—including Zuzia, Kamil, and their parents.

"Let's spread out here," said Dad, unrolling a blanket on the grass.

"We've got a great spot, Kami!" said Zuzia. "Ten paces from the lake!"

"Is there a jetty?" asked Kamil.

"You bet! And a big slide into the water!"

"Great! Show me the way!"

✳

Next to the grassy beach two boys were kicking a ball around. Several children were splashing in the water, but there was no one on the slide.

"Here are the rails," said Dad, placing Kamil's hands on them. "The ladder has twelve steps. Zuzia, you go first. You can help Kami at the top."

But Kamil managed on his own. He carefully climbed the ladder, and then, screaming with joy, he slid down into the water. Then he had another go. And then another.

"It's great!" he shouted.

Dad went back to the blanket.

The next time Kamil climbed the ladder, the two boys had tired of playing soccer and were now standing at the bottom of the slide. They were each about nine years old. One had fair hair, and the other was a freckly redhead.

"Hurry up, kid!" said the fair-haired boy. "Are you pretending to be a snail?"

"Hey, he's blind!" said the freckly boy.

"You, blind kid, get down from there!" shouted the fair-haired boy.

"That's exactly what I'm doing," said Kamil, and zoomed down the slide into the water, where Zuzia was waiting for him.

The boys climbed up the slide. By the time they'd slid down and returned to the ladder, Kamil was on his way back up it.

"Hey, he didn't understand," muttered the freckly boy. "Tell him to get lost."

"Get lost, blind kid!" shouted the fair-haired boy. "You're blocking traffic."

Kamil stopped halfway up.

"I can't go any faster," he explained. "I can't see anything."

"Nothing at all?" asked the freckly boy. "Not even the lake?" Kamil shook his head.



"And he won't give the ball back!" whined Kamil.

"Either you'll deal with it yourselves," declared Mom, "or I'll do it. But in that case I'll lock the ball in the closet for a week. Your choice!"

✳

"Kami, are you afraid?" asked Zuzia on the stairs.

"You bet. What about you?"

"I am too. . . ."

Mr. Kowalski was retired. From dawn to dusk he planted flowers, watered, pruned . . . and got terribly upset whenever dogs slipped through the fence into his garden, or someone tossed an empty can onto one of his flowerbeds. So what would happen now?

✳



Mr. Kowalski was picking up bits of glass. The ball was lying next to him.

"Good morning," said Zuzia, gulping. "We've come to apologize to you. Because that ball . . ."

"I was the one who kicked it," admitted Kamil.

Mr. Kowalski glared at them sternly. There was a silence filled with tension.

If he starts to scream at us, I'll bawl my head off, thought Kamil.

"Are you two kids under the impression that if you drop glass on the ground you'll grow a greenhouse?" asked Mr. Kowalski at last.

✳

Zuzia and Kamil came through the front door with their heads drooping. They didn't even close it behind them. They looked like sad puppies.

Mom was afraid Mr. Kowalski must have thrown them out of his garden—without the ball.

"He said . . ." began Zuzia tearfully. And then broke into a beaming smile and added, "We're not in trouble! He understands!"

"He broke a window with a ball when he was little too," said Kamil. "Next time he said we should use a balloon!"

Zuzia ran out to the staircase where they'd left the ball and a bunch of flowers from the garden.

"These flowers are from Mr. Kowalski for you. So you won't be angry with us anymore."



Hands Off!

Mom had taken Zuzia and Kamil to the museum. They went into the first room, and then Mom said, "Kami, there are paintings hanging on the walls, and two sculptures standing in the middle."

"What are the sculptures?" asked Kamil.

"A cherub and a ballerina. Look at them for yourself."

They were all alone in the room. Mom led Kamil up to the sculpture. The boy touched it with his hands.

"This is the cherub—it has wings," he said. And slid his hand downwards. "Gosh! It's got a bare bum!"

"It's bare all over," giggled Zuzia.

Kamil instantly wanted to check whether or not the sculptor had remembered to include another important part of the cherub's body. But before he'd had a chance, a man's voice boomed, "Hands off that bottom! Can't you see the sign?"



"No."

"Then learn to read!"

"I'm blind."

"So what? Touching the exhibits is against the regulations."

"What's an exhibit?" asked Zuzia. But Mom didn't answer because the man with the regulations had annoyed her.

"My son isn't touching the sculptures," she said firmly. "He's looking at them."

"With his hands?"

"Yes, that's right. Those are his eyes."

The man was horrified. He worked at the museum, and his job was to make sure people didn't touch the sculptures, or spit on the paintings, or generally do anything to harm the exhibits.

"What's an exhibit?" asked Zuzia again.

"Any item that you look at in a museum," explained Mom.

"Touching the exhibits is against the regulations," repeated the man, and clicked his heels. "And the regulations must be obeyed!"

Just then a woman came into the room. At the sight of her, the man clicked his heels again.

"Mrs. Kozak, I report that this boy was touching the cherub's bottom," he said to her.

"What on earth are you saying?!" said Mom angrily. "Kami can't see, so he feels everything with his fingers."

"But he was touching its 'backside,'" insisted the man.

The museum head—because that's who Mrs. Kozak was—said mildly: "Mr. Stok, we'll make an exception for this little boy. Let him touch whatever

A Multi-Level Christmas Tree

"Zuzia, hand me a red ornament!" said Dad, balancing on a ladder.

"Kami, pass me a Christmas ball," said Zuzia, and quietly added, "A green one."

Kamil was sitting on the floor, passing the ornaments, while Dad and Zuzia were hanging them on the Christmas tree—Dad from the top, and Zuzia from the bottom.

"Green means which?" asked Kamil.

"What do you mean, green?" said Dad, almost hopping about on the ladder. "I said red!"

"How am I to know which is red and which is green?"

Dad looked at the floor and gaped in amazement.

"Where have the red ones gone?"

"They're on the tree," said Zuzia innocently.

"All of them?"

"I'm arranging the colors by level. There'll be red ones at the bottom, then yellow above that, blue above that, then silver, then multicolored, and finally green at the very top."

Dad looked at the lower branches. There were nothing but red Christmas balls hanging on them. Above them were nothing but yellow ones.

"Zuzia!" groaned Dad. "Order is something you have in the cupboard, not on a Christmas tree."

"Why can't we arrange the colors in levels?" asked Kamil.

"Because . . ." began Dad, and got stuck, undecided. Luckily, Mom came into the room. She'd brought some gingerbread cookies



to hang on the tree.

"Kami, with colors it's a bit like with touch, taste, and smell," she explained. "Ice is cold, smooth, and white. Cold cottage cheese is white too. The sun is warm and yellow, and tomato soup is hot and red. While grass is cool, soft, and green. Do you get it?"

Kamil said yes. But he wasn't at all sure. For instance, what about cold ham—was it white or green? And why was Zuzia's idea such a bad one anyway?

Mom put the plate of gingerbread cookies on the table.

"Just make sure Loopy doesn't eat them, or they'll hurt his stomach!" she said. And went back to the kitchen, where she had a lot of work to do. Loopy lay down under the table with a sad look on his face. He loved gingerbread cookies! Surely they hadn't forgotten?

Kamil still thought his sister's idea was great. "Zuzia," he whispered. "Distract Dad so he won't look at me."

"Okay," she whispered back. And she began nagging Dad to let her arrange the ornaments in levels. While she was going on at him, Kamil ate all the cookies, leaving one for Loopy. The plate was empty.

"Oh, no!" cried Zuzia. "Loopy's eaten the gingerbread cookies!"

"What?" said Dad, almost falling off the ladder.

The dog waddled out of the room. Kamil pricked up an ear.

"Loopy's being sick," he said.

Dad couldn't hear the sound of vomiting, but he didn't have Kamil's sharp hearing. He jumped off the ladder, grabbed the dog lead and ran outside with Loopy.

✳

Kamil felt the tabletop. All right, there were a lot of crumbs on it. He wiped them off and threw them in the trash can.

"Couldn't you have done that the first time?" asked Mom. He didn't answer. He raced back into the sitting room.

✳

"Benjamin and his parents have gone on a flight into outer space!" explained Zuzia. "They're on the planet Tipi Tapi. Everything there is super-modern."

"I milked the cow," said Benjamin's dad from the television. "Now she wants something to eat."

"Milking cows is super-modern?" asked Kamil in surprise.

"On Tipi Tapi they have supertechnology. I'll tell you when it ends."

That was how Kamil watched cartoons: He listened to the voices from the TV, while someone told him what was in the pictures. He could watch on his own too, but then he couldn't understand all of it.

"Zuzia!" They heard Mom's voice. Their Mom's, not Benjamin's. "Go to the kitchen and put the plates in the dishwasher properly. Do you want them to get broken?"

Zuzia ran to the kitchen. You didn't want to argue with Mom. "Who's going to tell me the story?" said Kamil.

"I will," said Mom. "Benjamin's pumping water out of the well."

"Has he got super-modern technology?"

"No way! The pump's older than your grandma. Benjamin's on vacation at a very old village, where there's no electricity or running water."

"Zuzia!" thought Kamil. "You've taken me in again! I'll get you for that!"

✳

When Zuzia ran back into the room, on the screen Benjamin was dictating something to his mom.

"What are they doing?" asked Zuzia.

"They're writing about an encounter with a UFO," replied Kamil.

"They had an encounter with a UFO?"

"At the old village you didn't tell me about," explained Kamil in a solemn tone. "Too bad you missed it, that was the best part," he added.

Of course there was no UFO in the story. Kamil was just fooling his sister. But she'd started it. And so it goes, all the time. Although maybe . . . just sometimes?



information. For example, if the school principal walks into the room, tell your friend. You don't want them to say or do something that might get them in trouble.

You might think that people who are blind only see total darkness, but the fact is that most people have some vision. They might see light and darkness. They might see an outline of you but not be able to see the details of your face. For instance, they might not be able to tell whether you are smiling or sticking out your tongue at them!

Some blind people use a long white cane to find and avoid obstacles and to step up and down curbs or stairs. The cane is also a nearly universal sign to other people that a person is blind.

Canes have been used throughout history to help people get around, but the long white cane and the technique of sweeping it from side to side were developed by American Army sergeant Richard Hoover to help veterans of World War II who had been blinded in combat to gain more mobility and independence. These were people who had once been able to see, so they already knew certain things about the world. People who are born blind have to be taught things sighted people grow up knowing incidentally, in other words, things that they learn just by seeing them. Usually, if you see a refrigerator, you're in a kitchen. Usually, if you see a bed, you are in a bedroom. And, if you see a toilet, you're probably in a bathroom. In the United States, canes were first introduced and used by adults, and kids didn't get them until high school. These days, even preschoolers may have canes or other mobility devices to help them get around.

What about dog guides?

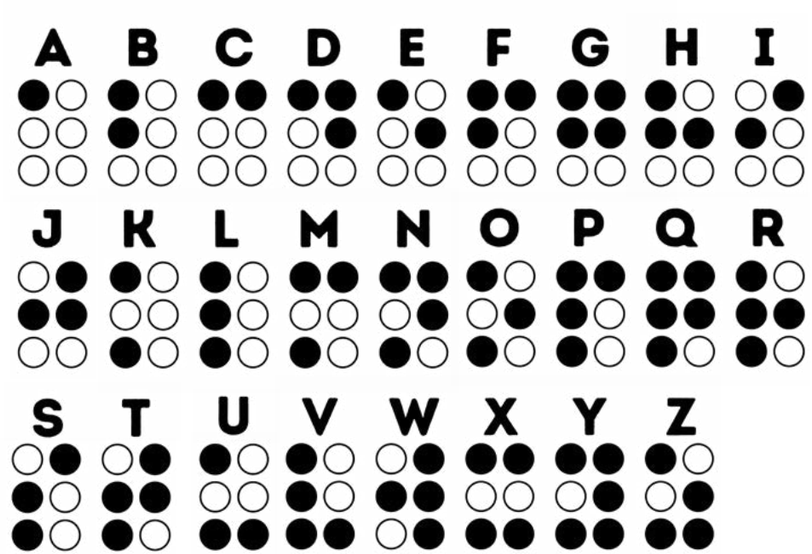
Only a small percentage of people use dogs to help with mobility. Partly, this is because it is a big responsibility. Partly, this is because the dogs—and the people—need a lot of special training. Dogs are taught many skills, but the person needs to give the dog commands. The two need to get along and learn to work together. Even though it is the law that dog guides must be permitted access to wherever the blind person needs to go, it can be a hassle to convince others.

What about Braille?

Some people who are legally blind are able to read if they bring a book very close to their eyes, have screens that can change the size and brightness of the type, or use a magnifying glass or machine with a camera that enlarges the text. Some people use audiobooks or text-to-speech. Some people use their fingers to read a system of raised dots called Braille, which is named after Louis Braille, the blind man who invented it.

Braille allows people to read at their own pace and read privately. They tend to remember more of what they read. And, of course, they can read in the dark! One disadvantage of Braille is that the raised dots make the pages thicker. For example, one middle school math book might be 8–10 volumes long! I read Braille visually, which means with my eyes rather than by touch. When the dots are made dark (see below), that is to help a sighted person see them a little better.

There are nearly 190 contractions in Braille, but here is the basic alphabet:



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