

## **A Cat's Tale**

*"To live is to function; that is all there is to living."*

Justice Oliver W. Homes

I was born alongside my brother seven years ago in the Bronx, New York, and from that day forward my life has been anything but normal. We dropped to earth only minutes apart on a snowy January evening in a shop cellar near Yankee Stadium. Old Jack Frost pasted his icy breath against the set of windows located on the back wall of the room and a small overhead light pierced the darkness and provided some warmth. Our mother, an orange and white colored short-hair called Daisy, named my older brother Satchel and me, Sam.

Satchel was jet black with no markings and yellow eyes. He had lean, handsome features and from the beginning displayed a confident and fearless manner. Mom named him after the great baseball pitcher Satchel Paige. I am a gray and black tabby with green eyes and despite my larger size, far less sure of myself. Daisy told me she liked the name Sam because of its clarity and strength. My brother and I never spent a day apart in our lives and for that I am grateful. We were as close in spirit as anyone could be, but our physical and emotional compositions were entirely different.

Like many others in our neighborhood, Satchel and I did not know our father and mother never mentioned him. The three of us lived, where my brother and I were born, in the basement of a butcher shop owned by the Rosen brothers – Abe and Morty – lifelong bachelors and two of the nicest people you would ever want to meet in your life. The pair had been in the meat business for more than forty years and for as long as I knew them, arrived at work each day dressed in pressed white long-sleeved cotton shirts, complete

with matching suspenders and bow ties. Their starched aprons – also white – did not stay that way for long. They worked long hours, shared an apartment above the store, and filled our bowls each day with their special mixture of oats and freshly ground turkey or chicken.

Our block quickly became our universe and its contents mirrored the diversity of the city. Daisy had lived at *Rosen Brothers* for several years, earning her room and board primarily through the ability to keep the place mice-free. But she was also a friendly and loyal companion, and deft politician. Her familiar face, whether stationed at her regular spot near the checkout counter or traipsing along the sidewalk greeting the block's constituents on her morning rounds, became part of our neighborhood. Abe Rosen had cut a small opening at the bottom of the rear door that allowed Daisy to come and go as she pleased, which she did.

Soon after my brother and I were born, mother introduced us to the people that worked in the storefronts on our block. From one corner to the next – lined up like a string of pearls – stood: a Chinese laundry, Jake's fish market, a small bakery, the Atlantic Twin cinema, a green grocer that never closed, and a shoe repair and shine shop owned by a bear of a man named Angelo.

“How are my buddies today?” Angelo would ask, standing outside his shop door in his undershirt smoking a non-filtered Lucky Strike.

On most days mother would slowly wander towards the man with the husky voice. Like a savvy ward leader that truly understood all politics were local and possessed the skill to make anyone they met feel their lives mattered, she brushed against his wrinkled pant leg before moving on.

“You guys take care,” he said, nodding with satisfaction.

We looked forward to our morning walks, especially Satchel. He showed boldness that I could not understand, and mother always said he would be the first of us to go to the emergency room. I hung back, more passive and willing to let my brother steal the show with his forceful personality. But for the most part, we did what Daisy said and never strayed too far from her or went outdoors by ourselves. At night, before she left for her nightly rounds upstairs or to scout the neighborhood, mother told us stories about men and women that polished the stars while everyone slept; she shared tales of other places too – where carts were drawn by winged stallions or about the kingdom of magical rabbits that lived underground in England. She patiently answered our questions, encouraged our imaginations, and soothed our young souls. Our mother made us feel safe, but I could not rid myself of the cautiousness I had stored inside while my brother embraced life’s uncertainty and acted as if he had never met a stranger.

Satchel and I were four months old and about the size of a boxing glove when we heard a different sort of timber in our mother’s voice late one evening.

“Fire, fire,” she screamed from the top of the cellar stairs. “Get to the backdoor, and hurry.”

My brother and I awoke from a deep sleep and did not know what to think. We bolted up the steps and onto the main floor of the shop where we encountered a yellow flame - broad and powerful - racing up the walls and across the ceiling at incredible speed. Smoke darkened the shop and our eyes burned. Things popped and shattered.

“Run children, run,” a distant voice cried.

“Follow me,” Satchel said, as we scampered toward the exit and pushed our way through the small opening of the door and into the alley. Behind us we listened for our mother’s voice, but heard only a series of crashes. In front of us, among other things, stood two large trucks with flashing lights and more than a dozen men dressed in black slickers and large helmets. They were unrolling hoses and heading past us into the building. We sensed the urgency in their voices and held a quiet resignation in our hearts.

“Let’s get out of here,” my brother said. With that order we broke into a dead-run, our anger and fear carrying us into the night; and for the first time, beyond the boundaries of our block.

The last thing I remember about that night is that we stayed on the move until we were exhausted and found what we thought to be a safe place to lie down and rest. The next day we awoke in a strange smelling place.

“Where are we?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” Satchel said.

“You are in the University Hospital,” a voice said, nearby.

“We’re where?” asked Satchel.

“At a health clinic on the Upper East Side of Manhattan - you two were as limp as dishrags when they brought you in here last night,” the voice said. “Don’t worry, the doctors and nurses will let you stay here until you are healthy again. They will take good care of you. Then, the deal is - they put you up for adoption.”

“What’s adoption?” I asked. “Satchel, where is our mother?”

My brother poked his head between the bars of the cage and turned in the direction of the voice. It came from a well-groomed cocker spaniel that told us he was a temporary boarder until his owners returned from Europe in a couple of weeks.

“What is your name?” Satchel asked.

“Plato,” he said.

“What kind of name is that?”

“My owners gave it to me and to be honest, I’m somewhat embarrassed by it. But what are you going to do?”

“We’ll call you P, how’s that?” I said, joining into the conversation.

“Fine by me,” he said. “You know, I’ve never known anyone from the Bronx.”

“Yeah, bet that’s right,” Satchel said.

But P turned out to be a great guy and the three of us became pals, something the cocker was missing despite his family’s wealth. My brother and I accepted him for exactly who he was – a tad snooty, but a gentle and caring soul that had a sharp and inquisitive mind. During the week, Satchel became our leader; the doctors nursed us back to health, and a man walked into the hospital asking about the possibility of adoption.

My brother and I were brought to the front of the clinic for an interview with a man called Nick and before we knew it, the newly formed trio was weaving its way across town toward an apartment located on the Upper West Side. Our heads swam with excitement; and sadness, since we did not have the opportunity to say goodbye to P.

Our new owner asked the taxi driver to make one stop, at a place called *Critters and Company* so he could buy some supplies for us. We accompanied him into the store and

listened intently as the man began his questioning of the store clerk on duty. Satchel and I looked at one another and wondered what we had gotten ourselves into.

“He’s a first-time owner, right?” I asked Satchel.

“No doubt,” he said, and together we agreed to name our rescuer Papa.

Those next four years in our small apartment on the edge of Harlem were some of the best ever. My brother and I wrestled and roughhoused, roamed freely during the night, learned to retrieve thrown balls and slept at the end of Papa’s bed. Our window opened onto the roof of our building and offered a slight glance of Riverside Park and the Hudson River. It also allowed the sounds of the city to remain part our lives. In the mornings, my brother and I sat side-by-side on the window’s ledge and enjoyed the seasons. Smells from the outside world rode a gentle wind that often brushed back the whiskers on our faces as we tilted our noses slightly upward for the full affect.

Occasionally my mind raced back in time.

“Satchel, do you ever think about mother and what happened to her?” I asked one day.

“No, not really,” he said. “She’s gone and I miss those times, but I try to stay in the present moment and move forward from there. I really don’t let myself go there anymore.”

“I feel guilty,” I said.

“Why?” my brother asked.

“I don’t know how to explain it except to say that sometimes I forget what she looked like. I feel badly about that – mother did so much for us and things were simpler then.”

“I know,” Satchel said. “But given the circumstances, we’re lucky to have landed here with Papa - that’s how I look at things now.”

The day the movers came and cleared all the furniture from the apartment I remembered being apprehensive as my brother and I huddled together inside a closet door. Something was up and sure enough the next afternoon we boarded a flight at the Newark airport for a place called Texas.

Our new home sat squarely on five acres, with another two hundred, completely wild, beyond the rock fence that bordered the main property. We were amazed at the space, but surprised even further when Papa picked each of us up in his arms and gently sat us down on the grass.

“Bless you boys and welcome to your new home,” he said. “You have the free will to come and go as you please now.”

With those comments and a momentary pause to gather in our initial reaction, he walked away and left us to explore our brave new world. I remember the freedom being overwhelming and that my brother and I briefly stood frozen in our tracks.

“Can you believe this grass?” I asked Satchel, slowly lifting one paw above the ground before placing it softly down again.

“What about the trees?” Satchel said. “We never saw anything like this in the city, close-up anyway. I think they are elms, maybe oaks.”

“Well, well who do we have here?” a gruff voice said from somewhere in the tree nearby. “You the two characters we’ve been expecting from New York City?”

“That’s right,” Satchel said, craning his head and trying to match a face with the voice. “And you are?”

A small bird exited from a knot about midway up the trunk of the tree and peered down at us. He was gray and brown, with a striking black throat and white eye-ring. "I'm Sammy the sparrow," he said. "I hope you boys don't have an attitude or want to act like tough guys; if so, this is not the place for you."

"No, no - that's not our style," I said, betting that my more diplomatic and less confrontational style would serve us better at this point in the conversation.

"Good," Sammy the sparrow said. "If you need anything, come back and just sit at the base of the tree. I'll know you are there. You'll need to meet everyone sooner or later and I'm the one to take you around and introduce you."

"Thanks," I said. "What do we call you?"

"Sammy the sparrow will do," he said. "Around here, you'll find most of us go by our full names, it's easier that way."

"I'm Sam, not Sammy and only have a first name," I said. "That's my brother, Satchel."

"That'll do," said Sammy the sparrow. "It's a pleasure to meet you."

"Likewise," we said, together.

Early that first evening Papa came out of the house and whistled. We came running and the three of us began what became a regular ritual, a half-hour stroll around the property where we checked on the gardens, grasses and soil, our working windmill and the barn. We learned quickly that water, the condition of the earth, and self-reliance were essentials in the West. It was the night too that Satchel decided to bolt unexpectedly up a large elm. When he stopped at one of the tree's upper branches and looked down at us, his expression was priceless – he had no clue how to make his way back to solid ground.

He was too high for Papa to reach by ladder and no amount of patience or coercion worked, so the local Fire Department had to be called to retrieve my crazy brother on our very first night in town.

“What do I do if this happens again?” Papa asked.

“Never found a dead cat in a tree yet,” the firefighter said.

“Much obliged,” said Papa.

Satchel continued to climb trees and I watched him progress from backing down slowly out of the ones where he was stranded to scaling and descending them with great skill. Eventually, we both learned – about that and many other things. That night Papa showed us our sleeping quarters, a doghouse located in the carport. It was large enough for both of us and several cotton blankets were arranged neatly inside. Close by and to the right, sat our food and water bowls.

In the beginning, my brother and I provided more than a few laughs for those who watched us navigate our way in the new wilderness. No doubt we were on a steep learning curve and our method was pure trial and error, but given the fact we were two street kids of color that spent their formative years in the city and were now facing an entirely different challenge, most felt we were doing okay. We seldom acted as know-it-alls and were eager to learn. Gradually our instincts and skills improved. We became adept at finding lizards – except for the Horned Frog of course, which is a legendary symbol of good luck – and keeping the mice and snakes at bay. After being on the receiving end of several zingers to the nose by a couple of black scorpions, we considered their presence another matter entirely and gave them their due respect. No harm done, we rationalized. But it did not require us long to find our stride and enjoy the comforts and

freedom of our new place. When the need arose, we traveled to the base of the secret tree and waited to ask questions and seek advice from Sammy the sparrow.

“The man is pure gold,” Satchel said after our last visit.

He was at that – introducing us to many of his friends that lived on or just beyond the property. I named them the Wild Bunch after the infamous outlaw gang, but they were miles removed from the likes of Butch Cassidy, the Sundance Kid, Ben Kirkpatrick or Laura Bullion, all members of the Hole-in-the-Wall outfit that had a shared history in this area.

First off, there was Susan Emile the Monarch butterfly, a black and orange beauty that traveled between our gardens and where she wintered in Costa Rica; an air dancer that performed mostly at the biblical herb garden or beside the New Mexico olive tree nearby. I took many naps there hypnotized by her magic and warmed by the afternoon sun.

Our two skunks shared the same name, but were distinguished by their differences on almost every subject imaginable. Black Herbie and white Herbie debated endlessly and at the drop of a hat, mostly about politics. Each held firm convictions, but like two country lawyers battling in the courtroom one minute, then sharing lunch the next – at the end of the day, they remained as close as ever.

Other than Sammy the sparrow, there were a wide variety of birds in our circle of friends. Among them were Milton and David, a mockingbird and dove that had impeccable credentials and were model citizens, despite being an oddly-matched couple. Mercury the hummingbird was a hoot. Darting and dashing about at breathtaking speed, and able to fly both forward and backward, he was our messenger of news and gossip.

But perhaps Satchel and mine's closest companions were the two bobwhite quail named Quincy and Quark, cousins that preferred to travel by ground more than air because Quincy was afraid of heights. They had blazing speed and were the smartest folks we knew. By nature, quail are the most active during the second hour of daylight and the hour preceding dark, and there were many days when the four of us explored and discovered the wonders of our valley at these distinctly different moments of the day. I had many heartfelt talks with these guys.

On the backside of the pasture, Bella the black bear spent most of the time by herself in a tree. She had emigrated from Central Mexico only a year ago and had almost the opposite personality of her neighbors, the Fox family, which had staked a claim to the barn roof nearby. Fred and Flora and their four kids – Nelson, Jack, Ralph and Steve were a somewhat hyperactive and arrogant group, and the boys always seemed to have female friends around.

“Even jerks have girlfriends,” Satchel said. “Besides, how can I possibly be civil to Boston Red Sox fans? Jeez, we were born in the shadows of Yankee Stadium.”

“Let it pass,” Sammy the sparrow told us. “Study your history and realize it's not worth the energy.”

There were others worthy of mention too.

June the javelina was a calming influence and inspiration to us all. Widowed by a hunting accident last year, she was homely and nearsighted, and pleasantly plump for her age, but she was fiercely protective of her brood and a conscientious mother. If her kids messed up in the outside world, they were really in trouble when they came home.

Russell the raccoon visited regularly each night as did the extensive John Deer family, a group claiming to be direct descendants of the famous family of the same name and no doubt, the closet thing to blue bloods we had around here. It was always rumored that our most well known native son, Montgomery the mountain lion, would pay us a surprise visit one day when he returned from his trips elsewhere; but he never did, choosing instead to stay away from the crowds at his private retreat in the highlands.

“He’s a pensive fellow and what I’d describe as a loner,” Sammy the sparrow said one day in an effort to describe him for my brother and me. “But he is physically magnificent and has this charisma and sort of movie-star quality about him. Monty knows who he is and from where he came. You would like him.”

Robert the bobcat and Tucker the tarantula were universal characters that regardless of where one lives, there is someone that resembles them. Robert had the best sense of humor and a likeable, self-effacing manner. However, some days he tried a bit too hard and his basic pessimism became overbearing. “Bobcat” as we called him, always had a story and most of them came from the bushel of old vaudeville gags he had learned at his grandfather’s knee.

“Do you know how hot it gets in Texas during the summer?” he asked Satchel and me one afternoon.

“No, how hot does it get?” I asked.

“Well, there was a woman washing dishes in Lubbock last year and when she looked out the kitchen window, she saw the dog chasing the cat.”

“So,” I said, waiting.

“They were both walking,” he said.

My brother and I sighed while Bobcat laughed.

“I just love that story,” he said. “I don’t know why, but I do.

“Wait, wait,” he said before we had the opportunity to walk away. “One more, okay?

“A man goes to see his doctor, and says, ‘hey, doc what do I about this yellow skin?’

‘How about a brown tie?’ the doctor said.

‘I’d like a second opinion,’ the patient said.

‘Alright,’ said the doctor, ‘you’re ugly too.’ ”

“We’ve got to go,” Satchel said. “See you”

“See you,” Bobcat said.

Tucker on the other hand was a good soul whose idealism and inner beauty overshadowed his physical imperfections. He moved slowly and silently, and performed work on the place no one else cared to do - such as managing the unwanted roach and termite populations. Warranted or not, he could frighten the daylights out of human beings if they suddenly spotted his hairy body creeping vertically up their bedroom wall or meandered into their path outside.

“Patience is everything,” he told me, “regardless of what you do.” I’ve never forgotten that piece of wisdom or underestimated its source.

Without our newly found friends the adjustment to our place would have been far more difficult. Our lives were permanently linked and to an extent, we depended upon one another – especially since the interesting visitor or traveler that passed our way was often headed somewhere else. This is rough country; a place that demands self-reliance, a strong instinct for survival, and the understanding that a strange resignation plays tag with its critters. It was also our home, where we now belonged.

But all was not sweetness and light either, and my brother and I were left to fight some battles of our own; ones we were obliged to resolve alone because of our relationship with the owner. It took about six months to stake a clear claim to the property. To do so, we butted heads with an array of feral cats – Toms and females – tough guys whose faces wore the scars of previous jousting.

“They’re like the schoolyard bullies we knew on Atlantic Avenue in the Bronx,” Satchel said. “We have to stand up to them. If we do, I’ll bet you they will melt away in no time. Or kick our tails.

“Otherwise what’s the point?” he added. “We have two choices – slim and none – and slim just walked out the door.”

“That’s comforting,” I said, dreading every single second of the fact confrontation lay-in-wait for us. “I hate when you talk like that.”

You know - my brother was right. That’s not to say there were not some harrowing moments, but in a few weeks’ time Satchel and I fought our way to freedom, earning both respect and a permanent place for ourselves.

A clear turning point in my life came a couple of years later, when I wandered into a vacant house down the road from our place and a sudden gust of wind slammed the door shut behind me, locking me inside. I did not think much of it at the time, however, when the moment arrived to leave for home and my evening meal, and there was no way out - my knees weakened and my heart dropped like a stone into my stomach. It was also the first night I had ever spent away from my brother.

Although Satchel was younger, he had always been the dominant one. He was a fearless lad whose motor ran constantly, but not recklessly. He believed in free will,

cherished his independence and in choosing to live life fully, was willing to accept complete responsibility for his actions. He was absolutely unafraid to fail, a quality I admired perhaps most of all and one that I frequently considered, wondering if one day I could learn that particular mindset. For the most part, however, I found it easier to rely on his leadership for direction.

But during my imposed confinement, I confronted some of the missing pieces of my character and in doing so discovered an inner reserve that must exist in each of us. As I scrambled for nourishment - I learned that in a pinch, water from the toilet tasted like it came from the tap and that the content of my imagination was far richer than I thought. At first, I cried out for help so intently that my voice became hoarse and ultimately reached the point where no more tears were left inside of me. Gradually, I confronted the solitude and the silence and ended up the better for it. I remember the darkness of that first night alone and the only recognizable sound being the jingle-jingle of the red, heart-shaped tag that hung from my collar. Each year Papa took us to get physicals and each year we received a different colored heart from Doc Jefferies as a result. The tag had our name, address and phone number engraved on it. But its familiar ring is what comforted me that first night and others that followed.

Nearly a month passed before a carpenter opened the door unexpectedly one morning. I seized the moment and bolted passed her towards the daylight. Outside, I ran to stretch the muscles and tendons in my legs that had been inactive for so long and quickly felt the heaviness, but my heart was light and soaring homeward. When I came to the rock fence at the edge of our property I bounded over it and into the pasture. I continued to run, completely unafraid and I remember how good that felt. Later, a bit

tired physically and emotionally breathless with excitement, I found a quiet place to gather myself and wait for the sun to go down. Despite being gone for only a short time, things felt strange – somehow different.

I had learned in my solitude that daring - serious daring - begins in the soul. I learned too, that a second chance at life is a gift many never experience. I looked around and felt the simple glory of the tree I now rested beneath, or in the idea of seeing a smile work its way across my brother's face. I looked forward to sitting in the window and waiting for Papa to arrive home safely before I went to sleep tonight. I learned that everyone has merits, flaws and something to offer in life, if only it is their best.

That night I used a little-known entrance into the barn and began to call for Satchel. I wanted to surprise him, but I also wanted to keep my homecoming a secret until we had the opportunity to visit privately. But the voice I heard approaching the barn was not that of my brother, but Papa's, and when he opened the door, I sauntered out just as pretty as you please, head erect, with an indiscreet cobweb running horizontally across my nose. I was amazingly calm when Papa picked me up, and I felt as safe as anytime in my life. It was a glorious feeling to come home again.

Afterward, there were the usual celebrations. I told my story and everyone listened carefully before asking what seemed like a thousand questions. Papa gave me extra tuna for a couple of days. But what I realized is how much I missed everyone, and really, how much I had taken for granted in the past.

“Good to have you back bud,” Satchel said before turning in for the evening.

“Thanks,” I said, wishing I could bottle the moment for a lifetime.

Later that summer I disappeared again, but the outcome was not as generous.

Things had settled quickly back to normal – Sammy the sparrow still ruled the roost and the cast of characters on our place had thickened. I became more adventurous than ever, exploring for longer periods of time and farther from home. But the end for me arrived suddenly, when my collar snagged a piece of barbed-wire fence and would not let go. I recognized the danger and struggled valiantly to free myself, but to no avail. I died quickly and only twenty-five yards from where I slept at night.

Today I can see Satchel and the others, but they cannot see or hear me. It is like looking at them from outside a closed window. Or similar to those moments during an afternoon nap when one sleeps, but continues to hear the real-world sounds swirling nearby. Is that a conscious or unconscious state? I'm not certain, but I do believe the spirit lives on – at least I hope so. Those I've left behind are real to me.

Papa laid me to rest on the north side of the property by the barn. The morning and afternoon sun casts light and shadow there. All the members of the Wild Bunch came. The headstone, a large red rock from our stone fence, reads:

*Sam*

*New York City - Texas*

Satchel placed a smaller stone that had the word COURAGE written on it at the base of the larger one. The gang chipped in and put a clay replica of an old Mexican open-air bus with animals as passengers at the southeast corner. There is a flagstone border and green grass year around.

For awhile Satchel was more forlorn and confrontational than I'd ever seen him. Even as my younger brother he felt a unique obligation to protect me and I know he has encountered a sense of guilt during the brief period following my death. Like me, he

misses our camaraderie and the simple pleasures of sharing each day. He is more of a loner now, but continues to possess great will and tenacity. Still, I'd like to offer a helping hand and cannot.

From my perspective, I know that each of us must figure out for ourselves what is important. We must be brave enough to teach ourselves and wise enough to learn from others; to recognize that it is okay to play to win, but that the truth must always enter into it.

I remember the small bakery on Atlantic Avenue in the Bronx called Martha's Place. Stamped in black ink on the sides of her take-away sacks were the words:

*"Life is uncertain, eat dessert first."*