

**CAN EVIL WIZARDS  
MAKE BALLOON  
ANIMALS?**

**AND OTHER SHORT STORIES**

BY ALEX BROWN

**TALES OF MINZ**

*A Cobbler's Tale*

*A Lamplighter's Tale*

*A Librarian's Tale*

**THE TALE OF ROSE & ED**

*A House Named Haven*

*The Storytellers*

**COLLECTED SHORT STORIES**

*Can Evil Wizards Make Balloon Animals?*

# **Can Evil Wizards Make Balloon Animals?**

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**ALEX BROWN**



This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this book are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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For Jonathan Lehmann, who has listened to me  
ramble about stories for more than ten years now.

*Thank you.*

## FOREWORD

**W**hat would life be like without stories? As people, we eat and breathe narrative. We long for the high of seeing connections weaving through our existence, and we loathe the most tragic sentence any language has ever constructed: “I don’t have much of a story to tell.” Life without stories is farcical, impossible, and—dare I say—our most ghastly nightmare. Stories meet us on our lifelong expedition to answer the foundational question of being: “Why me, why here, why now?” Considering the fact that you are holding this book and even taking the time to read the preface (your attention span clearly surpasses my “look squirrel!” impulses!), I know you treasure the gift of stories.

Furthermore, what is to come on these pages is nothing but an ode to tales, sagas, and chronicles. You will find people and things often covered in shadows and dust, left forgotten in the ever-accelerating revolution of time, finally given their voice. Be warned, dear reader, these stories have a knack for refusing to leave you alone. Don’t be surprised if two days after their story is told you find yourself chuckling prompted by a simple memory, pausing and pondering with the tiniest of trigger points, or pressing a tissue to your eyes involuntarily. Such is the nature of stories. They’ve never been gifted in the art of staticity.

But that’s their prerogative, not mine. My aim is not to write the meta-narrative of literature itself. I leave that rabbit hole to the dreamers, philosophers, and Reddit scrollers. But in my brief chat with you, I do believe strongly that you deserve to know the story of the

man behind this reading journey you stand at the precipice of commencing. For me to call him simply a friend would be a sheer denial of reality, a false narrative, and the least-funny anti-joke. He is my brother. No further exposition is needed. The fact stands alone.

Little did I know 12 years ago that through a simple turn of a dorm room doorknob, I would enter more universes than I thought possible. With each page he placed in my hand as the years went on, he led me to forests once hidden, darkened homes now lit by purest warmth, and characters so real that I longed to sit in a pub with them. These are worlds I never deserved to know, but Alex insisted that I did. There aren't enough thank-you cards in the world to express my gratitude.

The storyteller who is metaphorically holding his breath, hoping that my preface ends before hypothetical hyperventilation kicks in, is one worth listening to. I know you don't know me besides these "attempting to be" whimsical words, but trust me, the story behind these stories has a voice growing more and more extinct in this constantly-evolving world of ours. Yet this voice, as soft as it may be, is the very one we seek to hear—a mere whisper, breeze, or breath. The story behind the story is what we people have sought for centuries, and it's the one that inspired Alex to write the deep and delightful stories which are a mere page turn away from you.

Dear reader, I've held your time long enough. I bid you farewell and let Alex take you from here as you enter the place where life and imagination meet. The beautiful escape we call "stories."

Jonathan Lehmann  
2023

## CAN EVIL WIZARDS MAKE BALLOON ANIMALS?

**I** am he who brings the night. I watched as the stars fell from the heavens, cascading down like fiery comets and flaming torrents of death and destruction upon the good green earth. *And I laughed.* I laughed because they were pulled down by my hand. I ripped the constellations out of the night sky. I've set fires to a thousand different worlds, and on those thousand different worlds, those same fires still burn to this day. They continue to burn, unquenched and unchecked, *like my rage.*

"I've awakened the monsters that slumbered in the Deep; caused them to rise from their watery prisons and wreak havoc upon unsuspecting towns and villages along the coastlines. I've created far more terrifying monsters with my own hand—all with the knowledge of dark and arcane secrets within my grasp—and sent them to roam the earth, to ravage and annihilate until their bloodlust was sated.

"I've toppled kingdoms and queendoms with but a glance and a *word*. I've conquered nations with armies and forces of darkness so vast and terrible that mortal man cannot look upon them without crying out in fear. I've crushed empires to dust and scattered their

remains to the four winds, spreading them out so they can never again rise from the ashes of their own ruin."

By the end, my words were in but a mere whisper. I leaned forward with a wicked gleam in my eye, a gleam which had caused many a brave heart to flee in terror.

*"I am he who brings the night, the night from which no man, woman, or child will ever wake."*

"That's nice," said the little boy, unfazed by my confession. "Can you make me a balloon animal?"

I blinked. That wasn't the normal response to my monologue. I've given such a soliloquy many times before—or something very similar to it—and *never* have I had such a blatantly insulting reaction.

This would never have happened if I hadn't lost my cloak and my wand. Oh, and my hat, too. Don't forget the hat.

Now, I suppose, you see the very depths of my shame. I don't think there's much lower I can go from here. Not *literally*, of course, seeing as I've descended into the depths of the Underworld on a dare—and delved even deeper, just to say that I did. This is all purely metaphorical. The situation I found myself currently in, though, was all too real.

I looked around the room brightly decorated with streamers and a large banner on the back wall which read something along the lines of "Happy Birthday", or some rubbish like that. Children in plastic party hats with stretched-out elastic string under their chins all stared at me. And I stared back at them. Not one of them looked even remotely afraid of me. How utterly *disappointing*.

The young boy still stared at me expectantly. In the next room over, oblivious parents chatted amongst themselves, happy that someone else was supervising

their children's interaction. I sighed, wishing for all the worlds that I was somewhere else, anywhere else than where I was.

"Of course, child," I said. "What kind of balloon animal would you like?"

The boy scratched his head and thought about it for a minute. "I'd like a T-Rex."

I blinked again. A *T-Rex*? That was what he wanted? I asked him as much and he shrugged.

"I like the T-Rex. It's pretty scary. You *can* do it, can't you?"

Had the child not been listening to me? Not even a single word? I shook my head with a wearied resignation.

"Child," I groaned softly. "I've worked magics you'd never believe, even if you saw them with your own eyes. *Of course*, I can make you something as simple as a T-Rex."

Once you've held magic in your hands and have learned to reshape the very fabric of *existence*, forming a T-Rex out of stretchy rubber and air is mind-numbingly easy. I could have made an *actual* miniature T-Rex to give to the child, but no. *He* just wanted a balloon animal that would pop the moment he held on to it too tightly, or it would droop and sag as the air leaked from its rubber skin.

The children in the room all *oohed* and *aahed*, though, as I handed the T-Rex to the child. Sure, my impassioned speech about how I once had a name that would turn hearts to stone and men's resolve to watery weakness, *that* did nothing, but I twist a balloon in a few places and suddenly I'm simply incredible.

Go figure.

Like I said, none of this would have happened if I still had my cloak—that awesome cloak of woven shadows, the one I stitched together with the very fabrics of reality and unreality. Or my wand, that unassuming yet deadly piece of whittled dragon rib-bone with which I worked strange and terrible magic. And don’t forget the hat, never forget that hat. Even I don’t know what purpose it served, other than that it looked *really good* whenever I wore it with my cloak.

But I don’t have any of those still. No cloak. No wand. No hat. And now I’m stuck performing basic, rudimentary magic and sleight-of-hand tricks at children’s birthday parties. *I hate my life.*

Other children come up to me with their infernal, incessant requests that bother me to no end. This one wants a puppy. That one wants a rhinoceros. The one with pigtails wants a cat. The one with curly hair wants a tiger. On and on and on it goes.

The smile on my face is only there because I am actively imagining the devastation I could work upon this room, this house, this neighborhood—indeed the whole *world*—provided I still had my cloak, wand, and hat.

I really do hate my life. That hate is what has always driven me. It keeps me on my feet, to keep going, to not give in and die—even in this, the most horrible of circumstances. And so, I grind my teeth together, force a smile upon my face, and make balloon animals.

It isn’t a bad gig, all things considered. Don’t get me wrong, I hate it with every fiber of my dark and blackened soul. But once I make the balloon animals, the little brats usually go off and play with each other, making insufferable sounds of joy and laughter—the sort of which should only be saved for triumphing over one’s

foes. I'm left to sit in silence, glorious silence, until a parent notices and says something along the lines of, "We're not paying you to sit, we're paying you to *entertain*."

I smile and nod, all the while plotting their eventual demise, and then the entertainment continues. I do a few basic magic tricks, the kids ooh and aah because they've no idea they shouldn't be impressed by warm-up exercises for real magic, and then the show's over, thank you for your time, here's fifty bucks.

But today was different. There I sat on a plastic folding chair in a room full of screaming, laughing children playing with their balloon animals. Only, I wasn't sitting alone. I didn't notice the child at first. She was easy to miss, just sitting there as still as a statue, watching all the other children laugh and play.

So, there I sat, and there she sat, while everyone else in the room played, laughed, and screamed. I studied the child across from me. She didn't notice me watching her. She was looking at the rest of the children playing together. It looked like part of her wanted to join in, only, she didn't know how.

Her hands were folded in her lap with no balloon animal held in her child-like grip. A somber expression was upon her face, the sort of expression more aptly found on an adult's face than a child's. She struck me as odd, to say the least. What made it odder by far was the fact that I recognized the child. She was the birthday girl whose mother had hired me for this insufferable event. There she sat, surrounded by all her friends, and I'd never seen someone look so alone, so *ignored*.

Well, that's not true. I have seen that before. A memory was dragged up, kicking and screaming from the black depths of my mind. *A memory of a small boy in*

*a dark forest, all alone, tears streaming down his face.* It was not a pleasant memory. It was not sweet, but bitter. It soured my face and twisted my grin into a grimace.

They say it is empathy that moves humanity to put themselves in another's shoes. *Foolishness.* It was not empathy that moved me to stand up and walk over to the child. *It wasn't.* You have to have a heart beating in your chest to have empathy for someone else—and I cut that out long ago. It still beats somewhere in a wooden box, somewhere on the far-reaching fringes of time and space, somewhere not even I remember the exact location of anymore.

For without our hearts, we die. But if it does not remain *within* us, it cannot *move* us, and so I know. I know it was not empathy that made me sit next to the child. Call it whatever you will, give whatever reason you desire. I blame that bitter memory that forced itself back into my mind, unbidden, unwanted. If I could forever forget my past, *I would.*

We sat, the girl and I, in silence. I crossed one leg over the other and folded my arms across my chest—a casual pose that did not reflect how uncomfortable I truly felt. Wear a mask, as they say, so that the world may never know your true face. Hide it long enough, and you may forget it as well.

“That was a nice story,” the girl finally spoke up, breaking into my thoughts and shattering the silence between us. “Too bad not a word of it is true, huh?”

I blinked in surprise. I did not look at her. “Whyever would it not be true, child?” I asked. “I’ve been called many things in my life, but never a liar.”

The young girl twisted in her plastic chair to look at me. I saw her expression out of the corner of my eye.

She was frowning, but there was curiosity in her gaze too.

“Well,” she began, “if you’re such a terrible person—a mass murderer by your own admonition, I might add—why would you be *here*, at my birthday party, making balloon animals and doing cheap magic tricks for children?”

I raised an eyebrow, my only response. She made a fair point, to be sure. But I had no intention of giving my reason for my shame away, especially not to a mere *child*.

I had no desire to tell her of the battle which had raged in the places between existence, the battle between me and my ancient foe. The battle that resulted in me being smitten, struck from the sky, and stranded upon this bleak and desolate patch of dirt with no way of ever leaving. It was my own fault, really. I was over-confident in my abilities. Then again, that was always my downfall. *She* thought I was dead, of course, and for the time being, I have no intention of giving any indication that I am otherwise still breathing and very much *alive*.

So, I obfuscated. Magicians are good at that, after all.

“That’s a big word for a child’s vocabulary,” I remarked. “*Admonition*.”

But the girl was already shaking her head. “No, it’s really not,” she said shortly. “You’re trying to distract me by complimenting my vocabulary. Stop dodging the question. Why are you at my birthday party if you’re this all-powerful wizard?”

I chuckled drily, despite my best intentions to remain distanced. The child’s determination intrigued me. “I never claimed to be *all-powerful*, child,” I told her. “Simply more powerful than most. But I’ll rise to your

bait. This conversation certainly beats the monotonous doldrums of this insufferable gathering of fools.”

I gestured at the rest of the children dismissively, uncrossed my legs, left over right, and then recrossed them, right over left.

“I’ll answer your question if you answer one of mine. Deal?”

I held out my hand for the girl to shake.

She hesitated and then took my hand in hers. “There’s a condition.” The girl spoke up, not letting go of my hand.

My eyes narrowed slightly, and somewhere in the far-reaching fringes of space and time, my heart skipped a beat. *A condition?* Had this child been playing me all along? Did she now hope to trick me into doing something for her?

“What’s the condition?” I asked, still hiding behind my mask of calm. But really, my thoughts churned and teemed, searching for the child’s true intent.

“You must promise me that you’ll tell the truth when you answer my question. *No lies.*”

I frowned. *That* was her condition? That I answer *honestly*? Why? How would she ever know whether or not I spoke true?

“Fine,” I agreed. “The conditions are set.”

The girl beamed happily at me and let go of my hand. It was the first I’d seen her smile. A radiant little thing, like a small sun, she was. Strange.

“Alright,” she said seriously. “You first. Ask away.”

I was still confused by her strange conditional request, and not entirely sure what was meant by it. But I had already shaken her hand. There was no backing out now. *Forward, then.*

“Very well.” I gestured at the room full of happy, laughing little fools. “This is your birthday party, is it not? And yet, here you sit, talking to me instead of playing with all your friends. Why is that?”

The remnants of the girl’s smile faded from her face. She looked at the rest of the children and that joy disappeared completely. “It’s true that this is my birthday party, but they’re *not* my friends. Not really,” she answered.

She was silent for a minute and then continued. “My mom invited my class from school. She thought it’d be a good way for me to make some new friends. We just moved here.” Her voice wavered. “I had friends back home before we moved. I miss them. I don’t want *new* friends. I want my *old* friends.”

She looked down at her hands folded on her lap and I thought I saw a tear glisten in her eye for a second. I looked away, uncomfortable with such a visible display of sappy, sentimental, useless emotion.

“Anyway,” the girl looked over at me with all traces of sadness gone, happy once more. “That’s me. Your turn.”

“A moment.” I hesitated, still bothered by her condition upon our agreement. “I promised to answer your question truthfully, and I *will*, but may I ask you why?”

“Certainly.” The girl smiled. “*After* you answer my first question. *Then* you may ask a second.”

I smiled faintly, despite my attempted annoyance. She was stubborn. I gave her that much, and a deep, forlorn sigh to go along with it.

“Very well,” I said. “You asked me why I am here at your birthday party—if I am an evil, mass-murdering, terrible, and altogether all-around nasty villain.”

I shifted on the plastic chair, annoyed with how uncomfortable it was, and then continued.

“I am here, making balloon animals and doing cheap magic tricks for insufferable children, whom I *hate*, because I lost possessions which were of great importance to me.”

“What did you lose?” the girl asked. I smiled at her. She frowned, and then it dawned on her. *My question first.*

“I wanted you to tell the truth because so many adults *don’t*,” she admitted. “They think you don’t notice it because you’re a kid, or that it doesn’t matter whether or not they’re being honest since they’re adults and they know best, even if that means *lying to you*. Have you ever noticed that?”

She shook her head and bit her lip hesitantly. “Mom does that sometimes. She told me we wouldn’t move, not ever, and then *we did*. She told me it would get better, living here, but *it hasn’t*. She told me the kids would be nice to me, but *they haven’t*.”

A tear rolled down her cheek and she brushed it away angrily, before glaring at me with a small fraction of that same anger. “*That’s* why I said no lies, okay?”

I sat there, quiet for a moment. I wanted to be annoyed. I wanted to be disgusted with her display of weakness. But as I sat there, in my mind, all I could think of was that small boy in a dark forest, all alone, tears streaming down his face.

A voice that hadn’t spoken in centuries, millennia, *eons* even, came back to me like it was uttered that same day. *I’ll be back, boy. You wait here for me until I come and get you, when it’s safe. You hear?*

The boy had nodded and waited. *And waited*. A part of me was still waiting, waiting for my father to come

back and get me. I hadn't thought of him in years. *That was where it all started, though.* That night made me the man I am today. And that part of me, weak and insignificant and *foolish* as it was, that part of me understood this girl. *No lies.*

"I lost three things," I admitted to the girl. "No, that's not entirely true. They were taken from me."

"What were they?" the girl asked curiously.

I paused, considering making her answer a question in turn before I spoke again. I decided against it.

"A cloak I wove from shadows," I answered the girl. "A wand I made from a dragon's rib-bone. And a hat of no particular significance other than the fact that it was *mine*."

"Who took them?"

"Someone better than me. Someone who saw what I was doing with them—the terrible atrocities I had committed—and decided that someone needed to stop me. And so, she did."

I fell silent and then added, "Without them, I can't leave your world. I'm stuck, unable to do magic of any real significance. Without them, I'm no longer who I once was."

"And would that be such a bad thing?" the girl asked softly.

Her question surprised me. It gave me more pause than I thought it would. We had now completely abandoned our agreed upon form of questions and answers. I found that I didn't care. We were just having a conversation now, she and I.

"Who would I be, if not who I once was?" I mused aloud.

The girl shrugged. "Whoever you want to be."

I stared at her and then shook my head slowly. “That’s a profoundly deep thought, you know that?”

She smiled and shrugged again. “I’m not sure you ever got around to fully answering my first question,” she remarked.

“You’re here because you lost your cloak, your wand, and your hat. That still doesn’t explain why you’re making balloon animals and doing cheap magic tricks for kids. Why aren’t you out trying to get revenge against the person who put you here? Or, at the very least, why aren’t you out looking for your stuff?”

She didn’t give me a chance to answer her. Instead, she answered her own question. “You know what I think?”

“What?” I asked, intrigued and yet fearful that she would say that which I dared not speak, even to myself aloud. And yet, strangely, there was a part of me that wanted to hear the girl say it.

“I think you’ve had a hard life,” the girl said finally, studying me.

“You’ve done things you’re not proud of. I think deep down, you *wanted* to be stopped. You now have a chance to be someone else—someone who isn’t a monstrous villain—and that *terrifies* you. If you really wanted to be the person you were before you lost your cloak and your wand and your hat, you would be out looking for them. Nothing would be able to stop you from finding them again and taking your revenge. But you’re here. *At my birthday party*. I think that says a lot in answer, don’t you?”

I thought about what she said. I thought about it a lot. Finally, I nodded. “Yes. Yes, I think it does,” I answered truthfully.

The girl smiled at me but said nothing. We sat in silence for a long while. All around us, the children still screamed and laughed and played, oblivious to our conversation, and we to them.

“Give them a chance to be kind, will you?” I nodded toward the other children. “Going through life without friends is no way to live. Take it from me. They may not be your friends now, but they *certainly* won’t be if you never give them the chance to try.”

I held out my hand for the girl to shake. “Deal?”

She took my hand and then hesitated. “There’s a condition.”

“What is it?”

“Can you make me a balloon animal?”

I snorted with laughter and smiled. “Certainly.”

The girl ran off and joined the rest of the children, a red balloon animal in hand. She smiled nervously at them at first and then laughed with them as they welcomed her into their fun without hesitation.

And me? I sat, watching them play. I pondered the child’s advice and wondered if it were true. For the briefest of moments, I wondered if my ancient foe had planned this all along, that I’d be forced to ponder my own morality and existence and perhaps, *perhaps* change into someone different. Someone better. Had she? Could I be someone else? Was that even possible?

I thought about going out and looking, at long last, for my cloak of woven shadows, my wand of dragon rib-bone, and my hat of no particular significance. I thought about returning with a fiery vengeance and getting my revenge upon my most ancient of foes. I thought about my rage, that burning rage that fueled the dark desires of my heart, the heart locked away in a

wooden box somewhere in the far-reaching fringes of time and space.

Then, I looked back at the young girl and saw that smile, that radiant look of joy, and thought something different. *Maybe I'll take off my mask of villainy for good, stay here, and do a magic trick or two instead.*

## THE PAINTER

**A**n old woman stood on the busy sidewalk amidst the bustling crowd. She stood under the faded awning of an establishment with boarded-up windows and a darkened sign on the closed door. The weather was dreary and gray. The rain came down from the cloud-covered sky and darkened the sidewalks and the city streets.

Passersby carried umbrellas to protect them from the rain and the elements, and they walked quickly with downcast and distant expressions. They moved around the old woman without paying her any mind. It was as though she were simply something to be avoided, like a lamppost or a mailbox.

The old woman knew their wearied and haggard expressions were not because of the weather. It had nothing to do with the rain. Even if it were bright and sunny, she knew their expressions would undoubtedly stay the same. They had forgotten something. Something important. They needed help remembering it again.

She set down the large canvas bags she held. After taking out several small metal cans rimmed with dried paint, the old woman rolled up her sleeves. With a careful eye, she stared at the barren wall of brick and stone next to the run-down storefront.

The old woman stood in front of the wall and held a paintbrush in her left hand. A wooden palette with bright and vivid colors was in her other hand. She studied the emptiness of the wall for a moment and then glanced back at the gray world behind it. She saw the frantic rush, the hurried steps, the ambitious, anxious drive of everyone around her. Then, she nodded to herself. A faint but determined smile passed across her face.

*This was exactly where she needed to be.*

She looked back to the empty wall and began to paint. The old woman painted slowly at first. Not for hesitation, but to set the painting's foundation. Her brushstrokes swept bright swaths across the brick and stone, like sunlight scattered amongst the clouds.

Still, the passersby continued to ignore her and move on. She did not care. She was focused on her work. She didn't know how long she painted. Maybe minutes. Maybe hours. The sun was still hidden behind the clouds, and all she cared about was finishing her work. Nothing else mattered.

As she continued to paint, the old woman added more colors, and her brushstrokes became more hurried and frantic. She seemed to match the speed and pace of the world around her with her painting. Droplets of color splattered and dripped like tears down the once-barren wall. She abandoned the brush altogether in some places and simply splashed paint straight from the cans. It sent brilliant cascades of color and light trailing across her impromptu canvas.

The old woman grinned with satisfaction and laughed in delight. Paint covered her clothes and speckled her face and hands, but she didn't care. Several people glanced over at her warily—such sights and

sounds were strange in the gray city. They soon looked away again, uncomfortable.

When she was done, the old woman lowered her paintbrush and palette and gazed upon her handiwork. The wall, once empty and barren, was now an explosion of vibrant colors and shapes. It stood in utter contrast to the gray world around it. It was breathtaking. It was beauty, it was joy, it was *life*.

The old woman smiled to herself and nodded. She wiped her hands on her already paint-stained jeans and gathered up her supplies. She placed them back in the large canvas bags. Then, without so much as a second glance at her masterpiece, the old woman turned and walked away. She soon vanished into the sea of people. Her work was done. It was time to move on.

The people continued to walk past the artwork at a hurried, frantic pace. Most of them paid the new mural no mind. They simply didn't notice it. But every once in a while, someone happened to glance over and stop. They hesitated. It usually wasn't for very long—no more than a second or two. *But it was enough.*

And just like that, even just a little bit, they began to remember. They remembered what life was like when the gray clouds weren't there. When the stress and concerns and worries could all be forgotten, even for a moment. Some of the weariness left their faces. Faint smiles broke through. One or two of the passersby even laughed aloud as the old woman had, surprising themselves. *Joy returned.*

As for the old woman, it would make her happy to know that her artwork had been noticed; that it made a difference in the lives of total strangers. That was why she made it in the first place. But, even if she never fully knew, that didn't matter.

She'd simply keep wandering from street to street throughout the city. She'd find those empty, barren walls. And she'd do her humble part to bring a little more color, a little more *life* into the gray world that seemed to have forgotten all about it.

## MILO AND ROSIE

Milo just knew it was going to be a good day.

“Milo, sit,” Rosie said. Milo sat. “Good boy, Milo.” Milo thumped his tail against the floor as Rosie patted his head. *THUMP. THUMP. THUMP.* Milo *was* a good boy. He licked Rosie’s small hand, and she giggled.

Milo liked hearing Rosie laugh. He liked it even more when he could make Rosie laugh. Milo loved Rosie. He knew Rosie loved him. They were the best of friends. They had been the best of friends ever since her parents brought her home. She was little now—she had been even smaller back then. That seemed like such a long time ago to Milo.

Rosie didn’t do much at first—she cried and took a lot of naps. Milo didn’t mind. He’d curl up next to her cradle and take naps with her. As she got older and began to toddle around, that was when their *real* adventures began. They’d been going on adventures ever since.

Milo wriggled and scooted forward to lick her cheek—Rosie had syrupy pancakes for breakfast. Yum. Rosie giggled again—peals of laughter that made Milo keep licking her face. Rosie fell backward. She and Milo rolled on the floor together playfully. More licks. More giggles.

“Rosie, the bus is here—don’t be late!” her mother called from the other room.

The giggles stopped. The licks stopped. Rosie sat up; her small face suddenly serious as she looked at Milo. He stared back, equally serious.

“I have to go to school now, Milo,” she told him. “But I’ll be back, and we’ll have great fun together. Understand?”

Milo wagged his tail against the floor. *THUMP. THUMP. THUMP.* Rosie told him that almost every morning. She always came back, just like she promised, so Milo wasn’t too concerned that she was leaving him. He didn’t know what school was, but Milo figured it was kind of like work. Rosie’s parents went there almost every morning too. They also came back at the end of the day—usually later than Rosie.

Milo didn’t mind. That meant he and Rosie had lots of time to play together and have great fun, just the two of them. Milo liked having fun with Rosie. They’d explore the woods behind the house and they’d play fetch in the backyard for hours and hours on end. He licked Rosie’s hand to let her know that he understood.

Rosie giggled and gave him a great, big hug. Her arms didn’t quite make it around his neck. Milo was a large dog, and Rosie was very small. Milo was always careful to be gentle when they played together. He didn’t want to hurt Rosie. She was his best friend.

Rosie clambered to her feet. “Milo, sit,” she said. Milo sat. “Milo, wait.” Milo waited. “Good boy, Milo.” Rosie patted his head again and then turned and grabbed her backpack from next to the front door. She grinned and waved at Milo. “Bye, Mom!” she shouted and then said to Milo, “I’ll see you later!”

“Bye, Rosie, have a good day at school!” her mother called back.

Rosie threw her backpack over her shoulder and dashed out the front door. She ran down the street corner to where the school bus was idling. She hopped on the bus. A few more children got on, and then the bus slowly rumbled down the neighborhood street.

Milo sat by the front door. Rosie had told him to wait for her to get back home. Milo waited. Milo was a good boy.

A few minutes later, Rosie’s mother headed out for work. Rosie’s father had already left for work. He was gone longer than Rosie and her mother. “Hold down the fort until we get back, Milo.” Rosie’s mother scratched Milo’s ears absentmindedly as she passed him.

Milo wagged his tail to let Rosie’s mother know that he would. *THUMP. THUMP.* Two “thumps”—only Rosie got three. That was because Milo and Rosie were the best of friends.

The front door closed, Rosie’s mother locked it, and then it was just Milo sitting in a quiet, darkened house. He was all alone. Milo didn’t mind. He yawned a great, big, toothy yawn—his tongue curled out of his mouth. Then Milo slid back on his haunches, sinking down to lie in front of the door.

Sunlight streamed lazily through the window next to the door and landed on Milo. It was warm and cozy.

Milo rested his head on his forepaws and closed his eyes. He promptly fell asleep, snoring loudly. His paws twitched and moved—he let out a few small “yips” in his sleep. Milo was dreaming of running around the yard with Rosie, barking, and having great fun. It was a good dream.

Milo slept for a long, long time. He woke up to the sound of a key turning the deadbolt in the front door. Rosie was *home*—he hadn’t even heard the bus! Milo scrambled wildly to his feet, tail wagging frantically back and forth. He barked joyfully to let Rosie know that he’d been waiting for her this whole time, that he was a good boy—yes, he was—and that he was ready to have great fun with her. Milo wriggled his whole body excitedly. Most days, Rosie would throw open the front door. She’d laugh and run forward to give Milo a big hug.

Today, the front door opened slowly. And Milo instantly knew that something was wrong.

Rosie was home—but she wasn’t laughing. Her shirt looked crumpled and dirty, and the left knee of her jeans was torn open. Her hands were scraped, and her knee was bleeding. Silent tears brimmed in her eyes. Her lower lip wobbled as she stood there on the porch. She limped inside, closed the door, dropped her backpack, and sank down to sit on the floor. Then she started to cry. The tears rolled down her cheeks, and her shoulders shook.

Milo didn’t know why Rosie was sad. He sensed that she was hurt. Milo didn’t like it when Rosie was hurt or sad. He wanted her to be happy. Milo knew what to do. He padded forward and sat next to Rosie at the front door. He licked her cheek, trying to be helpful.

Rosie started to cry even harder and threw her arms around Milo’s neck. “Oh, Milo,” she whispered. “Why do the other kids in my class have to be so *mean*?” She buried her head in his shoulder, sobbing.

Milo didn’t mind.

There they sat. They sat for a long, long time.

Eventually, Milo whined softly and nudged Rosie's hand with his nose. She began to pet him, but he could tell her heart wasn't really in it. Milo flopped over with a dull *THUD*. He rolled on to his back with his paws in the air. He looked upside-down at Rosie. His tongue was hanging out of his mouth.

Rosie still looked sad. Milo wriggled on his back a bit. Rosie began to smile, despite her tears, and scratched his belly. Milo rumbled happily and wriggled some more. At the sight of him, Rosie let out a little laugh.

*There it was.*

Milo liked hearing Rosie laugh. She flopped down to lie next to Milo on the floor and looked into his eyes. Milo looked back at her. He scooted closer so he could lick her face. Rosie giggled.

“Oh, Milo.” Rosie hugged him tightly. “I’m glad we’re best friends.” Milo was glad too. He licked her face again.

Rosie held on to him. Her tears were beginning to dry. “You’re a good boy, Milo,” she whispered. “I love you.” Milo thumped his tail against the floor to let her know that he loved her too. *THUMP. THUMP. THUMP.*

It still ended up being a good day.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Alex Brown is the son of two teachers who impressed upon him from a young age a love for reading books of many different sizes, shapes, and genres. Along with that love came the love of telling stories and writing about fantastical lands and people.

He lives in Wisconsin with his lovely family and is most likely writing various works of fiction and drinking lots of coffee right now. *Lots.*

You can keep up-to-date on his writing projects by visiting his website: [alexbrown.blog](http://alexbrown.blog). There, you'll also find free short stories, whimsical blog posts, and more.

