



# THE MAN IN THE CEILING

CLOSE ALL DOOR

SAFE

A BIG ADVENTURE DOPI

WHERE?

## JULES FEIFFER

# THE MAN IN THE GEILING

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藏书

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# **THE MAN IN THE CEILING**



*Jimmy goes camping with his father. Not in real life; this is a comic book. Jimmy's father wears a broad-brimmed hat with a flat crown and a safari jacket with pockets for everything: a map, a compass, a flashlight, fishhooks. The way Jimmy draws him, he looks like Indiana Jones.*

*Jimmy's father is an expert woodsman. Not in real life, but in the comic book. He guides Jimmy through the dense forest by light touches on the shoulder. When he touches his left shoulder, Jimmy goes left; when he touches his right shoulder, Jimmy goes right. His father's touches feel good to Jimmy. Bears are in these woods. Also snakes. "Doin' fine, kiddo," says his father, who doesn't talk much.*





## CHAPTER 1

Sometimes Jimmy imagined his father carrying a canoe on his shoulder and sometimes not. The trouble Jimmy had with the canoe idea was that, if they were trekking through these thick woods, wasn't the canoe likely to bang into trees, knocking his father off balance, possibly into a swamp with live alligators? Actually, not a bad idea. Or this: What if the canoe got tangled in the branches of a tree, high off the ground, and just hung there? Jimmy liked that even better than the alligator idea. He had to laugh as he drew it.

Jimmy's father called him "kiddo" in the stories that Jimmy made up. Jimmy didn't entirely mind that his actual father didn't call him "kiddo" or take him camping in the woods. First of all, it wouldn't have been as much fun, and second, his father was too busy and overworked to take him camping in the woods. The word Jimmy heard most about his father was "overworked." The way



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his mother said it, “overworked” sounded important, even a little mysterious, something that perhaps Jimmy should grow up to be.

Father always brought home a pile of papers from the aircraft plant where he overworked, not far from where Jimmy and his family lived in Upper Montclair. “Don’t touch my papers,” Father said every time, although neither Jimmy nor his mother or sisters ever dreamed of going near his papers. Just to look at them was enough to know that these were papers not meant to be touched. They had *equations*. Father might just as well have said, “Don’t touch my atom bomb.” Why in the world did he think that Jimmy would be tempted?

At times, Jimmy drew on the floor just behind the metal desk where Father worked on his papers. It made him feel that they were colleagues of sorts, two men—the only two in the family—busily making mysterious marks on sheets of paper. I say “mysterious” because Father no more understood Jimmy’s drawings than Jimmy understood Father’s equations. Jimmy felt self-conscious drawing with Father nearby. He pretended that Father was not really working on his equations but watching Jimmy out of the corner of his eye. So every line Jimmy drew was a line for Father. Not that Father got it. Mother sometimes got it, but she was an artist herself, so it was to be expected. His older sister, Lisi, got it, but she was Jimmy’s biggest fan, so big deal! But Father? Father never got it.



The effort it took to make a good Indiana Jones drawing made Jimmy grunt. The grunts were for Father's benefit. Jimmy hoped that just once Father would look up and say, "Not as easy as it looks, right, kiddo?" But Father didn't hear Jimmy's grunts. He was lost in thought over his equations. Sometimes Jimmy invented things to say to get his attention. Like one time he asked, "If you love, I mean really love your job, isn't it fair that you should be paid less?"

This was on his mind because, while he intended to grow up to draw cartoons (which he loved), still and all, he had to make money to support a family. So the question was not frivolous. Jimmy continued: "If a job is fun,

maybe you shouldn't get paid—or O.K., paid, but food and carfare and something for the movies. I mean, shouldn't you get paid more for a job you hate?"

Father's pen hand stopped jotting down numbers. His eyes lost focus and his face took on a funny, pinched look. It was as if he were trying to translate Jimmy's words into his own native tongue. But that couldn't be, because Father was born in Columbus, Ohio.

"Don't bother your father, he's busy," said Jimmy's mother, who seemed never to be there except to stop Jimmy from bothering his father. At other times she said, "Don't bother your father, he's resting," which simply wasn't true. Jimmy never saw Father rest. Even asleep, he looked like it was a job.

So, between a busy father and a resting father (as if!), Jimmy chose to create a father he *could* bother. And this father—his Indiana Jones of a father—was so ideal that Jimmy wouldn't have wanted his actual father to be like that. It would confuse things. He didn't mind sharing his actual father with his two sisters, Lisi and Susu, but his Indiana Jones of a father? No way!

## CHAPTER 2

Jimmy's older sister, Lisi, was close to Father in a way that Jimmy wasn't because Lisi watched baseball with Father. Jimmy didn't like baseball, and that was why he and Father weren't close and never would be. Because what else does a father do with a son but talk baseball and watch and play baseball? And talking to Jimmy about baseball was a waste of time. If Father wanted to talk to Jimmy about superheroes, that might lead to real companionship, but Jimmy knew nothing about baseball. Besides, he had no talent for the game.

So Father had no one to shag flies with or pitch to or give advice on how to play the game. Since he couldn't advise Jimmy, he advised the players on the TV screen and shared that advice with Lisi. "What you wanna do in a spot like this—two men on, no one out—is advance the base runners to second and third, which means the batter bunts, which is a certain out but puts your two



base runners in scoring position with two outs left to bring 'em home, except in this case, with Dombrowski, a .342 hitter, at the plate, and Mertz, the pitcher, up next (Mertz can't hit his weight), Dombrowski is sure not to bunt. He's likely to fake a bunt to fool the pitcher, but take a tip from your old man, he'll hit away, which is why the infield is in, to play the bunt just in case, but the outfield is playing deep, waiting for the long ball." This kind of talk, which Lisi appeared to understand, sounded like equations to Jimmy.

Don't get me wrong about Father. It's not that he didn't like Jimmy, he just didn't have a clue as to what he was about. He wanted a son he could share batting averages and pitching percentages with. Instead, he got Jimmy. He tried to make the best of it. I mean, he was still a father, he still paid for Jimmy's food and clothes and Christmas and birthday presents. He was a good father

in those ways. And he still managed to find things to say to Jimmy, like “Do you have to leave your pictures lying all over the floor?” or “Could you lower that TV down to a scream?” Or sometimes more hurtful things, like “Are you still batting zero for ninety? Ha-ha.”

Jimmy didn’t think Father was out to hurt him deliberately. He just didn’t know any other way to behave with a son who drew pictures. Jimmy left the pictures that Father complained about all over the floor on purpose. He hoped that Father would come upon them as if they were there by accident, and pick up the first page and then go on to the next ten or fifteen pages and be flabbergasted. “I can’t believe a boy of ten and a half could have drawn *this!*” were the words Jimmy imagined Father saying. He never said them.

His Indiana Jones of a father would have said those words. His Indiana Jones of a father was always encouraging.



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And Jimmy, who was not named Jimmy in the comic he made up, but Bob, leaped off the cliff . . .



And his Indiana Jones of a father caught him.

"He reminds me a little of your brother, Lester," Father had said to Mother more than once in regard to Jimmy. This was not a nice thing to say. Father was not a fan of Mother's brother, Lester. I'll tell you about that later. What's important to tell you now is Mother's response because that will explain a little about Mother. Her response was, "Uh-huh, I'd better finish, it's getting late."

Whatever it was she had to finish, and there are a million things mothers have to finish (and Jimmy's mother worked, so she could claim she had to finish a million and one things), she always needed to finish them when Father brought up Jimmy. Mother didn't want to talk to Father about Jimmy. Jimmy was *hers*, Lisi was *his*. Father and Lisi watched ball games together, played



Scrabble together, laughed at the jokes Mother didn't get together. But Jimmy was hers, and if she didn't understand Jimmy either, she didn't understand him in a way that was more sympathetic than Father's way. Mother generally laughed off what she didn't understand. She laughed off much about Jimmy, but she laughed in his favor.

### CHAPTER 3

One day Jimmy came up from the basement (his secret place to draw comics) and found Lisi showing some of his really old stuff to Father. Stuff that he had drawn more than a month ago and was ashamed of. Lisi was pointing to a picture. "That's you," she said. And Father responded, "That's not me," and Lisi said, "Yes, it is, it looks just like you."

Now, maybe it did and maybe it didn't, but this was a dumb thing to say to Father. Particularly since Lisi was trying to prove to him what she and Mother knew but not Father: that Jimmy was a really good artist. This was not the way to go about it. Father squinted at Jimmy's comic. He knew what he looked like, and he didn't look like that boob in a safari jacket. "My nose is *not* that big." Father snorted. "Where's my chin?"

Jimmy was crushed. First of all, the only reason Lisi knew that the Indiana Jones character was a made-up