

Mr Ka and the Robot

Bertie was in the library again. It was the middle of the night. He felt like busting something. It was like waking up and going to the refrigerator in the night except that Bertie didn't eat much. He was never hungry for food.

Last time, Bertie knocked some things onto the floor and pulled a lot of books off the shelf. That was easy, so it wasn't very satisfying. He also peeked into Mr Roger's desk. It smelled of apples. Mr Roger usually had an apple for lunch, which he stored in his desk to eat while he minded the library over the lunch period. The other teachers all had cafeteria duty, but the library was supposed to be open for lunch and the kids who might have minded it were all eating because there was only twenty minutes and you had to eat fast, so Mr Roger did it. So you had to listen to him eating that apple while you were trying to read.

Bertie was a fast reader. He had read all the books in the Penfield library and most of them in the little town library in the square by the train station when he could go there. In the town library he could only see the books in the children's room. Those were all incredibly boring and even more boring if you read them again. He was, he supposed, angry with Mr Roger for not having more interesting books and had probably pulled them all down last time looking for the other books, the ones that were hidden behind these ones. And then he was just angry. The others made fun of him when he did something stupid and they made fun of him when he did something smart and they made fun of him when he just sat there trying not to do either one. And not even behind his back. At first they had done it behind his back but after a while they found out he wasn't going to sock them so they said stupid and cruel things right to his face and since by that time there didn't seem to be any other way to treat him, when Bertie socked them in the eye it didn't matter anymore, they just went on. Now some of the bigger boys had made a club which only certain people could belong to. The purpose of this club was to catch Bertie alone and pound him back. One boy had an aluminum ring through which he had pushed a thumbtack with the point out so that if he pounded you he would rip something up, your arm or your stomach. Usually they swiped Bertie's glasses so that he couldn't see what to do. So far they hadn't smashed them but only left them somewhere so that he had to feel around for them afterwards. But one of these days that one boy was going to sock him in the eye and he'd be blind, too. As if it wasn't bad enough already.

Bertie hated being deaf. Mr Roger wasn't deaf but he acted deaf. Bertie had an idea you shouldn't do that, pretend there's something wrong with you when there isn't. Bertie thought he would like to sock Mr Roger in the eye, too, but he didn't dare. Maybe he would.

Tonight Bertie had decided to look into Mr Roger's desk more carefully. He pulled out all the drawers and laid them on the floor, making no noise so as not to ruin things right away. He looked in the back and underneath for things which had been hidden, or secret compartments. Then he started to go through what was in the drawers.

He didn't get far. Under some sheets of blank paper was a book he hadn't seen yet. The title was *The Book Of Ka*. He sat down to read, scrunching into the knee-hole of the desk so as not to

be noticed through the library windows if that guard and his dog came around. Later he thought that was stupid, he should just have taken the book, but at the time it didn't occur to him.

Bertie opened the book in the middle and found the beginning of one of the stories, or whatever they were.

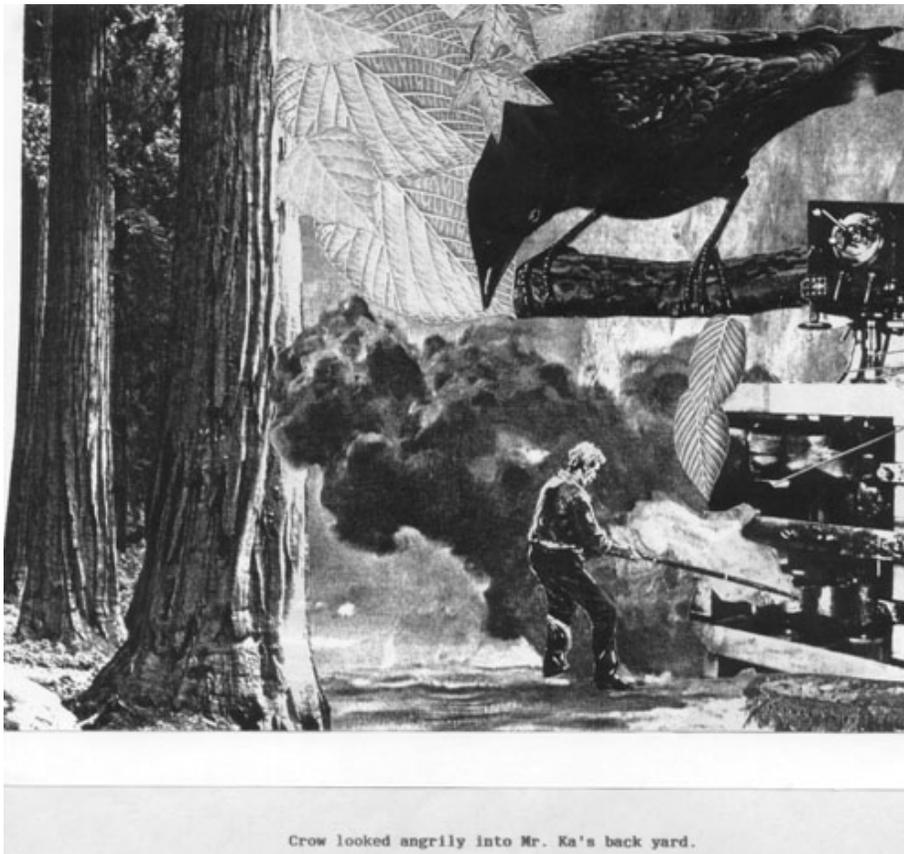
<< >>

You remember Mr. Ka, the inventor? From the last time, yes. Well, today Mr. Ka was angry with his neighbors. Goat and Cat and Crow, especially Crow, had complained very loudly, and at enormous length, about the furnace which Mr. Ka had built in his back yard. Mr. Ka was using the furnace to smelt metal for the new machine he was building, wonderfully strong and light metal, just the thing. But the furnace belched black smoke, and it stank, and fire leaped from it high into the air and withered the leaves on the trees. And so the neighbors complained, and Mr. Ka was angry with them, especially Crow.

What is his first name? the boy asked.

Paul Crow.

No. Mr. Ka.



Ka. Kaah! Kaah! said Crow, perched on the fence and looking angrily into Mr. Ka's back yard. Ka was peering into the mouth of his smelter, his face red with the heat that gusted from the open door. Inside, the furnace fire roared so that Crow's sharp voice could hardly be heard, and clouds of thick black smoke boiled out of the chimney overhead. Ka was wearing large mittens on his hands, and an apron, and goggles.

What is it now. Crow? he said.

The wind shifted, turning the plume of smoke more in Crow's direction, and Crow hopped down the fence a bit toward the corner. Ka was reaching into the furnace with a long pole, and with it he drew out a little cup of molten metal. The cup glowed hot red. Ka poured the liquid metal into a mold which was waiting on the ground. Then he leaned the pole up against the fence. A black iron pipe snaked across the ground from the fence on the alley to the furnace, where there were two large valves with round handles painted red. Ka turned these valves shut, first one, then the other. The roaring sound became a hiss. There was a bang and then silence, and Crow could hear the crackling of the hot metal beginning to cool. The last black marshmallow of smoke rose into the sky.

Ka took off his mittens and goggles. His face was as black as Crow's and he was smiling with the success of his work, until he remembered about Crow.

What is it now, Crow? You know I need to use this furnace for my work. How can you ask me to stop my work?

What are you making, Ka, that is so important?

I won't tell you. When has an inventor ever told a secret like that?

Crow spread his wings in disgust and flew away. Mr. Ka went into his house and slammed the door. He didn't notice Cat sitting on the corner of the fence by the house.

Cat jumped softly from the fence onto some shelves standing against the wall, and from there onto a wobbly table piled up with tools. This table stood under the kitchen window, which was open. Cat sat quite still there, except for the tip of her tail, which was tapping soundlessly. Her ears stood straight up, turned toward Mr. Ka's open window.

Mr. Ka was walking up and down, from the living room to the kitchen and back again, muttering to himself.

My neighbors want me to stop my work, he was saying, because it annoys them. I wonder if there was ever a time when someone wasn't annoyed about something. Well, I'll give them something to be annoyed about.

Suddenly there was a clatter of tools falling from the table outside.

Mr. Ka froze, his heart pounding. Who's there? he said in a squeaky voice.

There was no answer.

Bah! he said, no longer frightened.

Ka is planning something, Cat said that evening to Crow and Goat. But I don't know what it is. We must be careful. Crow and I will keep watch. Goat, you are the only one of us strong enough. You must be ready.

Baah! said Goat.

A week passed, and nothing was seen of Mr. Ka. His house was dark, and the smelting furnace was cold. Once or twice Cat thought she heard small noises inside, tinkering noises, but that was all.



On Saturday morning Mr. Ka's neighbors were awakened at dawn by a terrific din and when they looked out they found the sky so covered with greasy black smoke that it hid the sun. The air stank of burned meat and rang with the deafening clash of hammers.

Crow flew over at once to see what was going on. There in Mr. Ka's back yard was a huge robot, hard at work forging hot metal. Flames

roared from the furnace, leaping high into the air, licking the robot's metal skin. Mr. Ka's tree was on fire. The robot put its bare hand into the furnace and drew out the crucible of molten metal, which it set aside to cool while it returned to forging the metal which it had smelted earlier.

The robot worked without any tools at all. The din of hammers was the noise of the robot's great fists as it pounded flat a gob of white-hot metal. To make wire it drew a bar of metal through its fingers, stretching it out like dough, but with a ghastly screech.

And then, looking up, the robot happened to catch sight of Crow flying high overhead. It seized a stone and hurled it high into the sky, just missing Crow.

Crow flew home and told Cat and Goat what he had seen. Goat was strong, but he was no more than an ant compared to this robot of Mr. Ka's. The three of them decided it would be better to go to the park for the day. So they did, and had a fine picnic.

But when they came home that night they found the robot still at work, and it worked all night and all day Sunday. None of them got any sleep.

I'm going to go visit my uncle, grumbled Goat. Call me on the telephone when things improve here.

I'm going away too, said Cat. This is too much. And she slipped into the bushes and disappeared.

Crow flew up into a tree where he could watch the goings-on at Mr. Ka's from a safe distance. For three more days Ka's robot went on forging bars and rods and wires and sheets of metal amidst the fire and smoke and noise. But finally it was finished, and the day after that Mr. Ka returned home, rested and smiling, with a suitcase covered with stickers from all the places he had been.

Goat and Cat had come home again, too. Goat stood in the alley looking into Mr. Ka's back yard where the fence had been smashed down. Cat sat on his back, and Crow on a half-burned post nearby. The big tree was only a charred skeleton now.

Mr. Ka surveyed the scene with satisfaction, rubbing his hands. Then he went into the house, return-ing a few moments later dressed for work.

First I shall repair the fence, he announced to his neighbors. Then we will see what to make next.

Mr. Ka began to saw and hammer, putting up the fence again. Cat and Crow and Goat stared in dismay at the huge piles of metal the robot had left. A great many things could be made from that much metal. It would be many



months before that much metal was used up: many months of sawing and hammering and drilling.

But somehow Crow and Cat and Goat didn't feel they could complain any more, considering how quiet Mr. Ka's work seemed now. Really it was louder than ever. It just didn't seem so loud. So Mr. Ka's neighbors looked on, grumbling and complaining, but they kept it to themselves. And Mr. Ka whistled a smug little tune as he built himself a new fence, and turned the tree stump into a new table for his tools, and thought about what to do next.

How annoying that his neighbors should still be angry, though now they were polite enough to keep it to themselves. Didn't they know what a fine fellow he was?

I am sure I can convince them, Mr. Ka thought.

