

Foo and Friends

The Horse Capers



J.H. Sweet

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*To Ragweed Monsters
and Poison Ivy Fiends everywhere,
Beware.*

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Chapter One

Ragweed and Red Socks

Sitting by the front steps of his house on a late summer afternoon, Foo was trying to figure out what to do about a particular problem. There were no ragweed plants for nearly four hundred miles; yet, the entire neighborhood was smothering in ragweed spores, which most people were allergic to. The postman who had delivered the mail twenty minutes before had sneezed so hard he dropped his mailbag. Many other people had sore throats, headaches, coughs, muscle aches, and fever. In general, most folks just felt terrible. Even though magical foo dogs were not bothered by pollen, Foo felt very badly for others who were suffering.

Foo shook his head. He knew what was going on. The Ragweed Monster had come to town. However, Foo didn't have a way to deal with this because the nasty spirit had found a way to fall under the protection of Mother Nature. In carrying and spreading pollen, the Ragweed Monster was basically doing what the wind and many creatures such as birds and butterflies did. It didn't matter that the monster filled his giant pockets with the spores and carried them hundreds of miles from their normal areas to toss out huge handfuls

just to torment people. Foo shook his head again because he knew that *Foo Magic* wouldn't work on things relating to nature. The most Foo had been able to do was glare at the monster when he passed by, tossing ragweed spores and grinning evilly. Since Foo couldn't use magic, he would just have to rack his brains to try to come up with another solution to the problem.



However, Foo was going to have to wait to rack his brains over the Ragweed Monster because Pinkie had just arrived at his house. And she needed help with another sort of problem.

Pinkie often liked to surprise her owner by doing laundry when Mrs. Gunderson was away from home.

Pinkie loved doing laundry, and her owner loved the surprise. Upon returning home to discover the clean and fresh-smelling laundry, Mrs. Gunderson often declared, “I must have helpful elves about the house. And they must really like me to want to do my chores.” Mrs. Gunderson never would have imagined that her plastic flamingo was a helpful elf who really liked her.

Unfortunately, something had gone wrong today. Pinkie had accidentally washed white sheets and towels with a pair of red socks, and the entire load of laundry had turned out pink.

In a panic, Pinkie whined, “Why do they even make red socks? It’s just plain stupid! I hate red socks!”

Foo had never done laundry, so he didn’t know what to tell Pinkie. However, he knew that just listening sometimes helped. And that the person with the problem could sometimes come up with their own good solution just by talking things through.

“I know how to get stains out, like ketchup spills and mustard splatters,” Pinkie said. “But I don’t know how to change a whole load of pink laundry back to white.”

“How did you figure out how to get out stains?” Foo asked.

“Mrs. Gunderson has a book of *Helpful Household Hints*,” Pinkie answered.

“Maybe you could look in the book,” Foo said, “to see if there’s anything about fixing laundry accidentally turned pink.”

“That’s a good idea,” Pinkie said, now less panicky than before. “I don’t know why I didn’t think of that. I guess I was just so upset, I couldn’t think.”

Pinkie set off home right away to check the book of *Helpful Household Hints*.

Foo waved goodbye to his friend as she skipped away down the street.

Chapter Two Missing Horses, and More Missing Horses

Not long after Pinkie left, Mel arrived. Mel always seemed to know what was going on in the neighborhood before Foo. But, then, it was easier for the gnome to be out and about. Since Mel lived in a garden that was often overgrown, he was less likely to be noticed as missing than many other lawn and garden ornaments in the neighborhood. Foo himself, having been placed directly beside the front porch steps, usually had to wait until after nightfall to prowl around. However, several bushes growing around the front steps provided good cover for Foo's many visitors.

Mel was slightly breathless today, having just trotted all the way from his house. "Mr. Zimmer's antique carousel horse was taken from his porch last night," Mel said between trying to catch his breath.

"That's terrible," said Foo. Foo had just recently met the horse, whose name was Calliope, or Callie, for short. "I know Mr. Zimmer has been working hard to restore Callie," Foo added. "She was in pretty bad shape when he got her."



“But that’s not all,” said Mel. “Another horse went missing the night before last, a stuffed animal mustang belonging to little Angelica Jones.”

“That’s horrible!” exclaimed Foo. “Who would take a little girl’s stuffed toy horse?”

“I don’t know,” said Mel.

“Come to think of it,” Foo said, “Betherby stopped by yesterday and told me a boxed game of horseshoes was missing from a house down the street.” (Betherby was a friendly neighborhood ghost.) “He wondered if I had seen anyone carrying it off. He said the box had a picture of a horse on the front.”

Just then, Anton stopped by. The gargoyle was very interested in hearing about the missing carousel horse, stuffed mustang, and horseshoes game. And he had some horsey news of his own. “A painting of a horse has also been taken,” he said, “along with a rocking horse and a saw horse decorated to look like a real horse for the Founders Day parade.”

“Oh my gosh!” cried Mel. “It’s all about horses! What can we do?”

“We should warn other horses to be on their guard,” Anton said.

Foo was nodding. “We should call a midnight meeting too.”

The midnight meeting was held at Sophia’s home. The garden angel had set out refreshments on the cedar bench in Mrs. Hubbard’s side yard, and several of the neighborhood friends were able to attend.

Mel had more news to report. He shook his head sadly as he said, “A horse puppet and a horse jigsaw puzzle have also been stolen.”

Henrietta, the plastic owl, was also shaking her head. The horse puppet, Manuel, was her friend.

Just then, Spence, the bronze gorilla, arrived at the gathering. Lumbering up to his friends, he told them, “Basil stayed home to keep an eye the neighbors’ houses. Mr. Smith has a horse weathervane, and Mr. Wilder’s son has plastic toy horses. Since a giraffe statue can pretty much keep an eye on anything, being so tall, we decided that I should come to the meeting and he should stay home.”

“I’m glad I’m not a horse,” said Gilbert, the wire reindeer, somewhat shakily. “This is really scary.”

“We need to warn all of the horses in the neighborhood,” said Anton.

“But there’s a problem with that,” said Sophia. “Most horse decorations and toys live inside with people. So it will take some time to contact all of them to warn them.”

“And since we haven’t met all of them,” said Henrietta, “we don’t even know how many horses might be living in the neighborhood.”

“I think we need to get to the root of the problem,” Foo said. “We need to find out who is doing this.”

“You don’t think they might mistake me for a horse?” Gilbert suddenly asked.

“How could anyone mistake a reindeer for a horse?” Henrietta said.

“How could anyone steal a horse?” Gilbert replied.

“I don’t think you need to worry,” Spence told Gilbert. “But I promise that I’ll stomp anyone who tries to steal you.”

Gilbert did feel better having a friend as large as Spence on his side.

“Why are horses being targeted?” asked Henrietta. “This is very puzzling.”

“Maybe it’s someone who collects horses,” suggested Anton. “If he, or she, can’t get enough of horses, but can’t afford to buy them, that person might decide to steal them.”

“They used to hang horse thieves,” Spence said. “I think it’s still on the books in some states that they can hang people for stealing horses.”

“But these aren’t real horses,” Mel countered. “I mean, they’re not flesh-and-blood horses.”

No matter what kind of horses the missing ones were, the friends all felt very badly for them. And since they certainly didn’t want any more horses in the neighborhood to fall victim to a deranged horse maniac, they wanted to do whatever they could to help.

Chapter Three

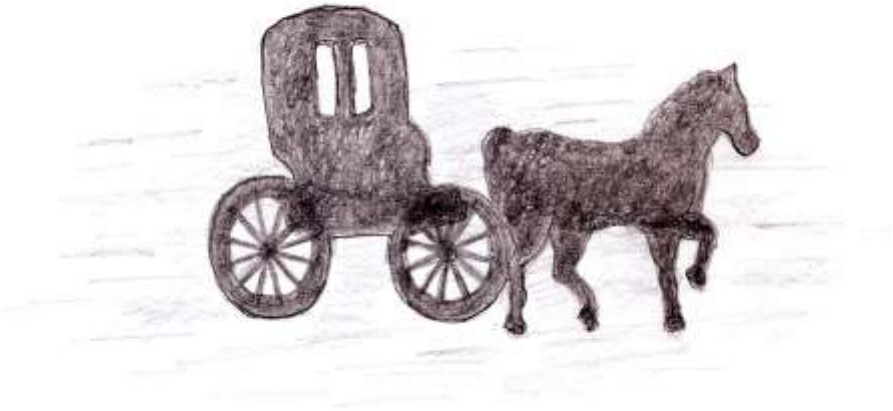
The Runaway Carriage

As the friends were pondering what to do, and as Sophia was starting to make a list of other horses residing in the neighborhood, a great ruckus was heard down the street.

Running to the front yard to investigate, the group heard a crash as several trash cans down the block were knocked over. As they stood on the sidewalk, peering down the darkened street, they heard clattering horse hooves and wheels crunching on gravel.

Suddenly, a horse pulling something large came careening out of the darkness and towards the friends, who had to jump backwards to keep from being flattened. As the horse screeched to a halt in front of them, Mel gasped, “It’s Carl Canterville and his buggy!”

Everyone was familiar with the iron horse-and-buggy silhouette that was usually bolted to the front gate of Mr. Klein’s estate. However, they were all shocked to see Carl running about, especially in such a noisy fashion. Thank goodness the noise hadn’t wakened the neighborhood. All of the houses, for the moment, remained quiet and dark.



“Carl! What are you and your buggy doing out?” cried Spence.

After catching his breath, but before answering the question, Carl said, somewhat indignantly, “It’s not a buggy, it’s a carriage! Buggies are usually only two-seaters, and this style of carriage can hold six.”

“Whatever!” exclaimed Henrietta. “What’s going on?”

“Someone tried to steal me!” Carl gasped. “I was asleep, of course, since it’s the wee early hours of the morning. Because I was sleeping, I didn’t see who took off the front bolts by my head. But I woke up when I heard someone loosening the back bolts by the

carriage wheels. I imagine whoever it was got a pretty big shock when I jumped from the gate and ran off down the road. Then I ran, and ran,” Carl went on, “and I didn’t dare stop until I saw some friendly faces.”

“Another horse caper,” Foo said. “At least this one was stopped.”

“I doubt the Kleins would ever sell me,” Carl said. “And if they did, they wouldn’t have the person come to pick me up in the dead of night. No, someone was definitely up to no good. I’m glad I woke up when I did.”

After a quick discussion, it was decided that Henrietta, Spence, Mel, and Foo would accompany Carl back to his house. Sophia and the others would continue to work on the list of horses so they could begin spreading word in the neighborhood of the possible danger.

When they reached the Kleins’ front drive, Spence lifted Carl and his carriage back up onto the gate while Foo and Mel secured his bolts. Foo then splashed the bolts with a *Foo Squeaky Metal Spell* so that Carl would be sure to waken quickly if anyone messed with his bolts again.

“I’m not too worried,” Carl said, “since I’m on my guard now. But if it happens again, I don’t plan to run. I plan to grab the mailbox and give the thief a good whack with it.”

In checking out the scene, Henrietta noticed several footprints in the soft dirt surrounding the gate. The thief’s shoes had a very distinctive zigzag tread. The

prints led up the drive to the road where they disappeared into the grass near the mailbox. Just beyond the mailbox, a set of tire tracks had recently crushed the grass as though the thief had driven away, probably in a truck given the width of the tracks.



Chapter Four

Investigating

The next morning, Foo and Mel began investigating by talking to other friends who lived near the scenes of some of the horse capers. Foo's owners were planning to be gone for the whole day, so he would be able to be away from home without being missed.

Nellie, the iron doorstep mouse, lived in an attic with a good view of Callie's house. She hadn't seen anything unusual. But she did tell Foo and Mel that a woodcarving of a herd of horses had been stolen from the next street over, as well as a book about quarter horses.



From the high spot on the fence where her sign was hung, the girl in the antique tin advertising plaque had a good view of two houses from which horses had been taken. Adjusting her red scarf and mittens, and fluffing her blond curls, Annabeth told Foo and Mel, “The day before yesterday, I saw a big blue truck that looked out of place in this neighborhood. I couldn’t see the driver very well, but I did see that it was a man with dark hair.”

They found a few more zigzag-tread footprints outside the house from which the woodcarving had been taken, but nothing else helpful.

Georgie, the fountain cherub, only had troubling news to tell them. “A hobby horse, a hitching post horse head with a ring in its mouth, and a pewter sculpture of a horse were all taken yesterday.”

In the afternoon, Foo and Mel stopped by Spence’s house. Basil was taking a nap, so they kept their voices low.

“Little Nancy Marie Croft...” Spence began.

“She’s not so little anymore,” Mel interrupted. “Isn’t she a teenager?”

“Yes, that’s what I meant,” said Spence. “Anyway, her Wilderberry Valley Farm books were stolen. That’s a horse farm mystery series. They took the whole set—all fifteen books.”

“This is a very crafty thief,” Foo said. “He’s taking some things from inside people’s houses, and some things from outside.”

When Foo and Mel left a short while later, they met up with Anton and Sophia in the City Park. The gargoyle and angel had been out for most of the day trying to warn other horses to be on their guard. They had some interesting news to tell Foo and Mel.

“We found out that a man came two weeks ago to inquire about buying Callie,” Sophia said. “And he got a little angry when Mr. Zimmer wouldn’t sell her.”

“Evidently,” Anton said, “the man is restoring an entire carousel and needs only one more horse to finish it off. But Mr. Zimmer bought Callie as a gift for his wife, so they definitely want to keep her.”

“Mr. Zimmer told the police about the man,” Sophia added.

“But even if he took Callie,” Foo said, “why would he take all the other horses?”

“He didn’t take her,” Anton said. “When they tracked him down, he offered to let the police check his house and the place in the country where he’s working on the carousel. There was no sign of Callie.”

“We just thought it was an interesting coincidence,” Sophia said, “even if it’s not connected.”

Anton next gave Foo and Mel an update of other items that had been stolen. “Horse placemats, a cake pan shaped like a horse, a horse hood ornament, a pinto horse costume, a money clip with a horse engraving, a horse-head walking stick, and a stuffed toy Clydesdale named Champ from over on Goosecreek Circle.”

The friends were all starting to feel very helpless. They had chased all over the neighborhood and basically had nothing to show for it. The thief always seemed to be several steps ahead of them. And not only had they not been successful in finding out who was behind the capers, they had not been successful in warning very many of the area horses.

However, as the friends were soon to discover, their luck was about to change.



Chapter Five

The Rescue

Henrietta had spent much of the day flying about and doing her own investigations. When she spotted her friends in the park, she landed to give them an update.

“I was flying around the outskirts of town,” Henrietta said, “when I saw a blue truck parked beside the abandoned barn on the old Tisdale property. I thought it was strange that someone was there. By the time I landed, the truck was already heading down the lane to the road. But I found a lot of those footprints with zigzags around the barn. The barn was locked up tight,” Henrietta added, “but I looked through a knothole and saw the horse jigsaw puzzle, the decorated saw horse, and a walking stick with a horse head on the handle.”

“So that’s where the thief has been stashing the stolen horses,” Mel stated.

“It’s time to mount a rescue!” Foo exclaimed.

However, mounting the rescue was going to have to wait, at least for another few moments, because Henrietta had something else important to tell them. “I have a friend who works at the police station,” she said. “His name is Saul and he’s a glass sparrow

paperweight. Saul told me some of the owners of the stolen horses have filed police reports. Six have been filed so far.”



“But way more than six horse items have been stolen,” said Anton.

“I guess other people haven’t thought to contact the police,” Sophia replied.

“They should,” said Mel.

“And that might be exactly what we need to do too,” said Foo.

“But how can we contact the police?” Mel asked. “We can’t reveal ourselves, not even to the police.”

“If Henrietta’s friend is willing to help,” answered Foo, “I think getting them involved will actually be quite easy. And we won’t need to reveal ourselves at all.”

In only a few minutes, the group had made an excellent plan.

Sophia had scratched out a note, which she folded neatly and gave to Henrietta, who set off right away.

Keeping to bushes and tall grasses, Sophia and Anton headed towards the barn, while Foo and Mel went to collect Spence. Since it was getting on towards evening, the gorilla would surely be able to sneak away for awhile to help with the rescue of the horses.

As Foo, Mel, and Spence made their way to the barn, Sophia and Anton stationed themselves along the road, very near the lane leading to the barn, to watch for the arrival of the police.

Meanwhile, Henrietta had made her way to the window of the police station where she waited for the coast to be clear before tapping her beak on the glass to get Saul's attention. Meeting Henrietta at the window, Saul listened to his friend's urgent whispers before nodding and taking the folded note from her. He then flew to drop the note on the desk of the detective in charge of the cases of the stolen horses. Saul was just getting settled back in his normal spot on the police captain's desk when the detective came back from his coffee break to discover the note.

"Who put this here?" the detective asked, after reading the note. The desk clerk was just coming in from the mail room and shrugged her shoulders as she shook her head.

The detective next asked a uniformed officer to accompany him on a short jaunt, and the pair promptly left the building.

When Foo, Mel, and Spence reached the barn, they decided to have Spence break down the door. “It would take too long to pick the lock?” Mel said.

With this, Spence backed up a few feet before ramming the door, which splintered into about a hundred pieces from this single blow. Spence loved to smash things, but he hardly ever got to. Foo knew this, which is why he didn’t tell his friends that he could have easily popped the lock using *Foo Magic*.

Back at the police station, as the detective started his car, he showed the note to the uniformed officer. “Well, I’ll be,” the officer said. “We don’t get many anonymous tips like this anymore.”

“Let’s hope it pans out,” the detective replied.

The note, in Sophia’s pretty handwriting, simply read, “*Look for the stolen horses along Farm Road 15, between the pond and the curve in the road.*”

Meanwhile, along Farm Road 15, Sophia and Anton were keeping watch. Since the old barn wasn’t visible from the road, and the entrance to the lane was very overgrown, they were worried the police wouldn’t be able to find it. It was also starting to get dark, which would make the lane even harder to find. However, Anton had come up with a plan; and he was ready to carry it out.

Back at the barn, after being briefly startled by Spence’s crashing entry, the horses were overjoyed to see their rescuers. It was hurriedly decided that the six horses with corresponding police reports would remain in the barn so that the police could find them while

Foo, Mel, and Spence would help the others return to their homes.

However, no one was going to get to go home right away because trouble, in the form of a blue truck, was heading toward the barn. Anton and Sophia had seen the truck turn onto the grassy lane, but they didn't know how to warn Foo and the others.

Upon arriving at the barn and seeing the door smashed, the man driving the truck jumped out and ran into the barn, severely startling the other occupants. As the horses whinnied and reared, the rescuers froze for a moment, unsure of what to do.

“Hey!” the man shouted. “What’s going on here?”

“I’ll tell you what’s going on here,” Mel said. “On second thought...I’ll just show you,” he added, springing into action. As the gnome grabbed a pitchfork that was easily two times his height, the horses also began to act. Kicking at the wall by the door, Champ and Calliope literally made it rain horseshoes that had been nailed to the wall. About thirty in all came pouring down.

In order to escape being pelted with the heavy shoes, the man ran forward and straight into the saw horse. As he doubled over, the horse puppet and horse costume flew in a flurry at the man’s face to temporarily blind him. This gave Mel a chance to get into position behind the man. Wielding the long pitchfork, Mel commanded, “Get into that grain bin over there!” Champ and Calliope stood on either side of Mel, snorting and glaring angrily at the man. As

Mel moved forward two steps and again said, “Get into that bin,” the walking stick, puppet, hitching post, costume, and saw horse also joined the group in herding the man toward the back of the barn where they forced him into the grain bin.



Foo and Spence just stood back because Mel and the horses seemed to have everything under control.

As the man cried out in protest, Mel said, “Oh, settle down! You’ll be just fine in there until the police get here.” After tossing the man a horse blanket, Mel closed the doors of the grain bin. He then secured the

doors by tying the handles together with strips of old horse reins.

Sophia and Anton had been right to worry about the police not spotting the lane to the barn. The car passed right by. However, they were going slow enough for Anton to carry through with his plan. He had found an old cow bell in a nearby pasture. While hidden in the tall grasses beside the road, he began ringing it loudly, which caused the police car to stop and back up, whereupon, they discovered the lane. Running alongside the lane on a path toward the old barn, Anton continued to ring the bell, all the while keeping to the grasses and bushes to stay hidden.

“It’s like we’re following a cow,” said the detective, as he slowly wound the car down the lane.

“That’s a pretty smart cow,” the officer added.

Meanwhile, the ringing had served another purpose—that of a warning, which allowed most of the occupants of the barn to leave before the police arrived. By the time the police entered the barn to discover the six remaining horses, and the thief locked in the grain bin, the rescuers were well on their way to returning the other horses to their homes.

Chapter Six

Everything Back to Normal

Foo, Mel, and Spence spent much of the night getting the stolen horses back to their homes. Since *Foo Magic* could easily undo locks, this task was fairly easy. But it was also somewhat time consuming because they had to be as quiet as possible.

At the police station the next morning, the detective was laughing as he told his captain that a smart cow had led them to the stolen horses.

“Maybe the cow left the note for you too,” the captain joked back.

On a slightly more serious note, the detective told the captain, “The thief is Joseph Tulle, the nephew of the woman who filed the report about the pewter horse. They are sending him to the hospital to get his head examined. He’s saying that Mr. Crisp’s garden gnome came to life and attacked him. Have you ever heard of anything so bizarre?”

“You mean other than in the movies?” the captain replied. “No, I’ve never heard of anything so bizarre.”

“But someone did tie that grain bin shut,” the detective said.

“It was probably the anonymous tipster,” the captain answered. “He locked up the thief, then left us

a note as to where to find him. It's as simple as that. No gnomes, just a helpful person."

"I guess," the detective said. "It just all seemed a little too easy."

On his lunch hour, the detective took a drive to visit Mr. Crisp's garden. Strolling through overgrown melon vines and okra stalks, he found the gnome, which looked perfectly ordinary to him. It was hard to imagine the tiny statue coming to life to wield a pitchfork and lock someone in a grain bin. However, before he left the garden, the detective did say, "If you did help us last night, thanks." As he was getting back into his car, he mused, "I wish all of my cases were this easy to solve."

That night, the friends met in the City Park. Henrietta had talked to Saul in the afternoon and had some news to report. "It wasn't a deranged horse collector," she said. "The thief really only wanted one horse, and the other thefts were a diversion to draw the attention away from that particular item. Evidently, the pewter sculpture is very valuable because it was made by I.M. Flemmington; and he is very famous. The lady who owns it was planning to put it in an auction and donate the money to charity," Henrietta went on. "This made her nephew really mad because he wanted the sculpture. So he stole it."

"And he took all of those other things," Gilbert said, "just to confuse the police and make his aunt think she was the target of a deranged horse collector who couldn't help himself."



“I have to admit the thief was very clever,” Foo said. “In the confusion, no one would have likely suspected him.”

“There is a bright side to all of this,” Anton said. “We got to meet a lot of the neighborhood horses.”

“That’s true,” said Mel. “I wouldn’t have even thought to make an effort to meet them otherwise.”

“This is a good lesson for us,” said Foo. “We should not wait for a crisis to meet more of our neighbors.”

“Right,” said Gilbert. “What about meeting ducks next? Lately, I have been noticing a lot of ducks in the neighborhood—duck windsock, duck decoy, duck pool toy....”

“And pigs,” Mel said. “Pig boot scraper, pig footstool, pig mailbox, pig sprinkler...”

The friends all agreed it would be a good idea to meet new friends, and they decided to plan the Duck-Meeting Project for the upcoming weekend. After the ducks were met, the Pig-Meeting Project would follow.

Pinkie paid Foo a visit early the next morning. “You were right,” she said. “The book of *Helpful Household Hints* had the answer, and I got the laundry all back to normal again.”

“How did you do it?” Foo asked.

“First, I took out the red socks,” Pinkie answered. “Then I washed the pink sheets and towels with a little bleach to get the pink out. Next, I gave the load two rinses to get the bleach smell out. Now, it’s all white and pretty. And it smells good, like it’s supposed to.”

After Pinkie left, Foo was finally able to turn his thoughts to the issue of the Ragweed Monster. The fact that he hadn’t had a chance to rack his brains over the matter actually turned out to be a good thing. As it turns out, on the same day as Foo and his friends were investigating the horse capers, a worse spirit came into town. Ushiol, also known as the Poison Ivy Fiend, liked to cause horrible blisters and rashes by spreading his nasty sap on public benches, tables, stair rails, and such like. But since the Ragweed Monster had just passed through, the Poison Ivy Fiend ended up sneezing himself right out of town before he could spread any of his nasty sap.

And the lingering ragweed spores were not going to be a problem much longer because rain showers were forecast for the entire week. The showers would clean the air and bring everything back to normal. Foo smiled as he thought, *I wish all of my cases were this easy to solve.*

About the Author

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