

Everybody in fifth grade thinks Buddy White is strange. He won't talk, or smile, or even pick up a pencil. Some of the kids make fun of him, but not Sam Keeperman. That's because he knows Buddy's sad secret. When Sam sticks up for Buddy, the other kids start picking on him, too. Joining forces against the bullies, the two discover what it means to be a friend.

Born in Edison, New Jersey, Marc Kornblatt started out as an actor in New York City after college. He turned to playwriting, worked for magazines and newspapers and co-wrote *Mission to World War II*, a book about Emanuel Ringelblum and the Warsaw Ghetto. He followed with books about the Spanish Inquisition and the American Revolution, and two picture books, before publishing *Understanding Buddy*. In his mid-40s he became an elementary school teacher. Making music videos with his students led to his next career as a filmmaker. Now retired from the classroom and a director/producer for Refuge Films, he lives with his wife Judith in Madison, Wisconsin and works as a full-time filmmaker.



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tonight at supper Martha asked Dad what he thought happened to the deer Laura White hit the day she died. Dad gave her a weird look, like the face Charlie Chaplin makes in the movie *Modern Times* when he eats a bowl of hot cereal seasoned with sneezing powder. Except Charlie's face is funny, and Dad's wasn't.

"How did you know Laura died?" he asked.

"I just knew," Martha said.

"Did you hear Mommy and me talking about her?"

"No."

"Then who told you?" Dad looked straight at me. "Did Sam?"

I thought Martha was going to tattletale. I stopped chewing my spaghetti and held my breath.

“No, Daddy,” she said. “A little birdie did.”

Dad smiled. I started breathing again. That Martha. For a six-year-old kid who can barely read, she says some pretty cool things once in a while. Of course, I’d never tell her that. It would just go to her head, which is already big enough, thanks to Mom and Dad always saying how cute she is.

The only reason I told Martha about Laura’s death in the first place was because she wanted to play with the controls in Mom’s car. I tried to explain to her how fooling around like that could release the parking brake, and the car might start rolling down the driveway. That got me on to the subject of car accidents, and before I knew it I had told her about Laura.

I didn’t mean to do it. Dad had told me what happened, man to man. That means I was supposed to understand Martha is too young to hear that kind of stuff, but it just slipped out.

Laura has been on my mind a lot lately. She

was a big, smiley woman with muddy brown hair and a lumpy face who used to be our cleaning lady. I admit, I wasn't crazy about her when she first came to work for us. One reason was I didn't want a stranger poking around in my room, even if she *was* there to get rid of the dust bunnies. I was afraid she would knock over one of my model skyscrapers, or mess up the South American beetle collection on my shelf, or rearrange the personal things in one of my drawers.

Another reason I wasn't crazy about her at the beginning was her personality. A stranger stays a stranger with me for a while before I start acting friendly. That first day Laura showed up at our house, she acted the exact opposite. I was trying to get ready for school, putting my lunch in my backpack, when the bell rang. I could have gone out through the kitchen and let Mom open the front door, but I thought I'd do her a favor.

Laura ambled in like a bear and held out her huge, red hand for me to shake.

"Who might you be?" she asked with a big smile.

“Sam,” I said.

“And what grade are you in, Sammy?”

“Fourth.”

“Well, what do you know about that? My Buddy’s in fourth grade, too.” I nodded as politely as I could and said, “I have to go to school now.”

Laura winked at me like we shared some important secret.

“Have a great day, Sammy,” she said, patting me on the head.

The pat on the head really annoyed me.

Laura only came to clean twice a month, and every time I saw her she gave me the same big smile, the same big handshake, the same wink and pat on the head. After a while I got used to her hellos, just like I got used to her calling me Sammy instead of Sam, because I could tell she was just trying to be nice. She also called Martha Marty, Mom Sandy, and Dad Bobby. I had never heard anybody call my dad Bobby before, which was one of the things I liked about Laura.

After saying hello, she almost always had something to ask.

“Tell me, Sammy,” she said one of the first times. “How are you at long division?”

“Okay,” I answered. “I got an 84 on my last quiz.”

Laura nodded. “Do you like doing your homework?”

“No.”

“Same with my Buddy.”

She asked me about my friends and about sports and about so many other things that after a while we stopped being strangers. The last time I ran into her on my way out of the house, Laura gave me one of her usual big hellos and asked me what I was doing for summer vacation. “Swim team, a typing course, hanging around the house,” I told her. “And a family camping trip.”

“That sounds very nice.” She patted my head and looked at me like she was measuring me for a sweater. “You’re a nice boy, Sammy,” she said. “Nice boys deserve to have nice summers.”

Then she bounded up the front steps and disappeared into our house.

I didn’t think much about it then, but after she died I kept hearing Laura’s voice in my

head. I missed her big hellos and having her call me Sammy. And I found myself thinking about where she was, wondering if she had a soul that climbed up a ladder to heaven like the one Jacob from the Bible saw in his dreams, or if all that was left of her was a dead body lying in the ground.

Dad told me that Laura was on her way to work for a family that lived near Leopold Forest when she smashed into a tree. It was a drizzly morning, and the streets were slippery. The police think her car skidded off the road when she swerved to avoid running over a deer. They know she grazed a deer at least, because they found blood and fur splattered along the edge of the car's front bumper. But they never found the deer.

When I asked Dad what he thought happened to Laura after she died he said, "Well, I know her body is buried in the cemetery."

"What about her soul?"

"I can't tell you where her soul is."

"What about heaven?"

"If there's a heaven, then maybe it's there."

"What do you mean *if*?"

“I mean, I don’t know. Our people don’t think about heaven much.”

“Why not?”

“Because we’re too busy living this life.”

I wasn’t sure what Dad meant exactly, but I didn’t ask him to explain, because I thought I’d only get more confused. So I dropped the subject.

Dad made me promise to keep our discussion to myself. He said it was confidential. I kept my promise for 73 days, up until this afternoon.

I’m hoping Dad will forget about Martha’s deer question before Mom comes home from her business trip, though I probably shouldn’t worry. I think he wasn’t supposed to tell me about Laura, either. The only thing Mom told me was that Laura wouldn’t be working for us anymore.

Whether Dad does or doesn’t forget, I know I shouldn’t have told Martha about Laura’s death. Now she’ll probably have nightmares, and it will be my fault. But I couldn’t help it. Laura has been floating around in my thoughts a lot lately, and today something happened that almost brought her back from the dead.

It was the first day of school, and a new kid, someone I never saw at Farmdale Elementary before, walked into my fifth-grade class and sat at a desk three seats behind me. His name is Buddy White.