

THE SCIENCE OF FRIENDSHIP

By MattieVandiver

Sage

Sage Lewton peered out of an open window facing the neighboring house. Today was like any other summer day in his life; he woke up to his alarm clock playing the *Star Wars* theme song at 8:07 am, put on a yellow t-shirt and gray pair of cargo shorts, ate Cheerios from his favorite green bowl with bananas that were sliced longways in strips at 8:31am with his dad, who read the *New York Times*. He read his favorite story (*The Hound of the Baskervilles* by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle) until 9:52am, then ventured outside to say hello to the toad in the bushes he had named Fred. After this, he watched a couple of planes fly by, contemplating how much they were contributing to climate change, then climbed up to his treehouse hidden at the top of a sugar maple. This building housed the window Sage was now staring out of.

This day started out like any other summer day except for one detail that made him stay longer in the treehouse than he usually would have (10:46 am). This summer, Sage hoped he would make a friend. Which is why he now found himself peering out of the window of his treehouse, awaiting his new neighbor.

The Reese-Chandler family was moving in next door and Sage had heard that they had a kid around his age. Someone who didn't know him. This was his chance to make a good first impression.

Sage had been practicing acting "normal" by himself in his room ever since he'd learned about this new neighbor. He'd been told he looked similar to a turtle when he walked. He didn't

want to look like a turtle. So, he stared at himself in a mirror while walking on the straight line of tape on the floor, tried to straighten out his back, and took one deliberate step at a time. Of course, this probably looked quite silly. He kept stumbling over his own feet as he was so used to looking down, and he felt strange standing up so straight. Eventually, he practiced enough that he could walk less like a turtle, though with a waddle.

In the distance, Sage saw a minivan hauling a U-Haul moving crate travelling down the road. It was quite a rocky road so it was doing a good deal of bouncing. A small bubble of nervous laughter escaped his lips as he watched the moving crate hit a large pothole and leap in the air like Fred. The moving truck stopped on the road for a second, then pulled into the neighbor's driveway, and parked.

Sage moved to perch with his hands on the window sill, watching anxiously for who might get out of the car. Would he even be able to pretend he was normal long enough to make a good impression? What if they still thought he was weird? Well, then he would be no worse off than before, he supposed. He took a deep breath, held it for four seconds, then released it, steadying himself against the wall.

Lydia-Mae

Lydia-Mae Reese-Chandler looked out of the minivan, still awed by the amount of grass and trees she could see. She was thinking about how she would organize her books once she got to the house, as well as her closet with her overalls and muck boots for exploring. So far, she hadn't had much use for the muck boots, but she was now hopeful that some exploring of the woods was in her near future.

Lydia-Mae was not your typical 5th grade girl, and she knew it. She spent most of her time observing insects under her microscope, reading about the jungles of South America, baking, and drawing plants. She was thrilled to be going somewhere more rural where she could garden and find species to document in her field notebook.

Her moms, observing that she didn't have much in common with the kids her age in New York City, decided that perhaps a move would do them all good. And that is how they ended up moving to the rural town of Kleserville, Massachusetts.

Lydia-Mae had heard that a kid around her age lived in the neighboring house. She briefly debated acting like a normal girl and putting on a summer dress, laughing and skipping less, and coming up with gossip from the city. With a shake of her head, she knew she would just be herself, and her neighbor would either want to be her friend and she would want to be theirs, or they wouldn't.

As they drove down a street in a small subdivision area, Ma announced, "Alright, fam, this is our street. According to Google maps, that is."

"Is that ours?" Lydia-Mae's other mom, the one she called Momma, exclaimed as they pulled up to a light blue house with window boxes that Lydia-Mae suspected could have flowers

if she planted them. Maybe pansies. Or zinnias.

The minivan stopped while they looked at the house, all amazed by the size of it.

Her Ma took a deep breath. “Okay, everyone ready?”

Lydia-Mae and her Momma nodded as her Ma pulled into the driveway, the U-Haul stumbling behind them, and parked.

Sage

The car door opened to reveal the driver with muscular arms, and short, dirty-blond straight hair tied back in a ponytail. The passenger door was opened by a small woman with graying brown hair cut in a long pixie cut and pale skin dotted with freckles.

Sage waited, then out stepped a girl, who looked to be around his age, with brown skin and black, frizzy hair tied in two buns on top of her head. She was wearing mustard yellow, corduroy overalls and bright red Converse. Sage especially noticed the overalls, as they were his favorite color. The girl took a couple of light steps toward the house, then turned to look around, and met Sage's eyes who were staring at her. They both stared at each other for a few seconds before the girl lifted her hand in a slight wave. Sage dropped to the floor, flat on his stomach.

He inwardly groaned, thinking, *Now what is she going to think of me? So much for first impressions.*

He peeked one eye out of the window. The girl was still there, looking at him. She let out a small peal of laughter when she saw him looking through the window again. "Hi!" she called in a kind voice.

Alright, Sage, he was thinking, now's your chance to make a friend. Don't mess this up. He forced himself to sit up straight and look at her, then call a soft, "Hello." Sage let down the rope ladder and climbed down. She was still there, staring at him with an amused smile.

When he was close enough that he could see her red Converse in front of him, he lifted his eyes a little higher to meet hers. He took a deep breath, then spoke just above a loud whisper, "My name is Sage. I live there."

"You live in the tree house?" the girl asked with a teasing laugh.

“No, just the normal house,” he clarified, then realized she was joking.

“Okay, well my name’s Lydia-Mae and I live there,” she grinned, pointing toward the house behind her.

Lydia-Mae, laughing, exclaimed, “Look, we’re matching!” as she moved closer to compare her overalls with Sage’s t-shirt.

Sage found himself smiling. “You like yellow?” he asked, hopefully.

“It’s my favorite!” she laughed, spinning around in circles.

“Mine too,” Sage murmured. “Would you...would you like to come in my treehouse?” he heard himself say before he could even process what he had asked.

“Absolutely!” she exclaimed with an amount of enthusiasm that scared Sage a little bit.

“Um, I forgot, it’s not really...clean?” he said nervously. “Maybe we should wait?” “I don’t mind,” she comforted.

Okay, Sage, you can do this, he thought. So he tried for a smile, and led the way to the rope ladder.

“You can climb up first,” he said, not wanting to be able to see her reactions when she realized how odd he was.

Cheerfully, Lydia-Mae responded, “Okay.”

Sage watched her climb and hoped that he hadn’t just dashed his chances at having a friend. Especially one that happened to have the same favorite color.

“Sage, this place is amazing! I brought my microscope too for studying insects,” Lydia-Mae exclaimed. She walked carefully around the room, examining each poster, book, and object in awe. “Wow! You have a telescope? That’s so cool!”

Sage watched from the top of the ladder as Lydia-Mae continued to look at his

special place, and a smile began to emerge on his face.

“You really like this kind of stuff?” he asked, not quite able to believe it.

“Of course!” she replied. “Wait until you see my book collection. My moms joke and say I have a mini library.”

Sage then had an idea. “Do you want to meet Fred?”

“Yes,” she responded immediately, then added as an afterthought, “who’s Fred?” Sage just smiled as he headed down the ladder. He’d never told anyone else about Fred before, not even his parents.

Sage led Lydia Mae along the outskirts of his yard, then bent down and started tapping on a large rock that was in front of the trees in between his house and Lydia-Mae’s house. “Com’ere Fred, here ol’ boy,” Sage called, and out hopped a giant toad frog almost the size of his hand.

“Oh, an American toad!” Lydia-Mae said. “*Anaxyrus americanus* I think is their scientific name.”

Sage looked up at her in wonder.

“Can I hold him?” Lydia-Mae asked.

Sage picked Fred up and set him in her hands.

“What a sweet frog,” she cooed. She looked closely at the frog for a few seconds, then laughed, “I’m not sure Fred is a boy.”

“Really?” Sage asked in surprise.

“No, look at the throat sac. It’s tighter than a male’s because the males have a deeper call. Also, females are bigger than males, and this is quite a big toad.” Lydia-Mae stood up straight

and in a loud voice announced, “I now name you Fredwina the toad frog!” Then she looked at

Sage. “Well, she can be called Fred for short, of course.”

Sage looked at Lydia-Mae for a second, then at Fred who was staring at him with her too large eyes, and started laughing in high gasps. Lydia-Mae started laughing too, in bright peals, until she had to set Fred down and they both fell to the ground, gasping for air.

After they caught their breath, Sage rolled over to look at Lydia Mae, and Lydia Mae rolled to look at Sage. Sage’s green eyes and Lydia Mae’s deep, brown eyes crinkled at the edges, and Sage felt genuinely happy for the first time in years.

“Lyydiaa-Maeeee!” Lydia Mae’s Ma called. “Time to come home!”

Lydia-Mae started to stand up, then Sage sat up and reached for her hand. She turned back to look at him, quizzically.

“Will you come back tomorrow?” Sage asked, with a slight tremor of nervousness. Lydia-Mae beamed, “Of course. And the day after and the day after that! And you can come to my house too!”

Sage, nodded then let go of her hand. Lydia-Mae reached to pat Fred who was still sitting by the rock. “Goodbye, Fredwina, ol’ girl,” she said with a wink at Sage. Then she skipped back to her house like a fairy sprite, calling behind her, “Goodbye, my new friend Sage! I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Sage watched until she disappeared into her house. *Wow*, he thought, *I have a friend.*