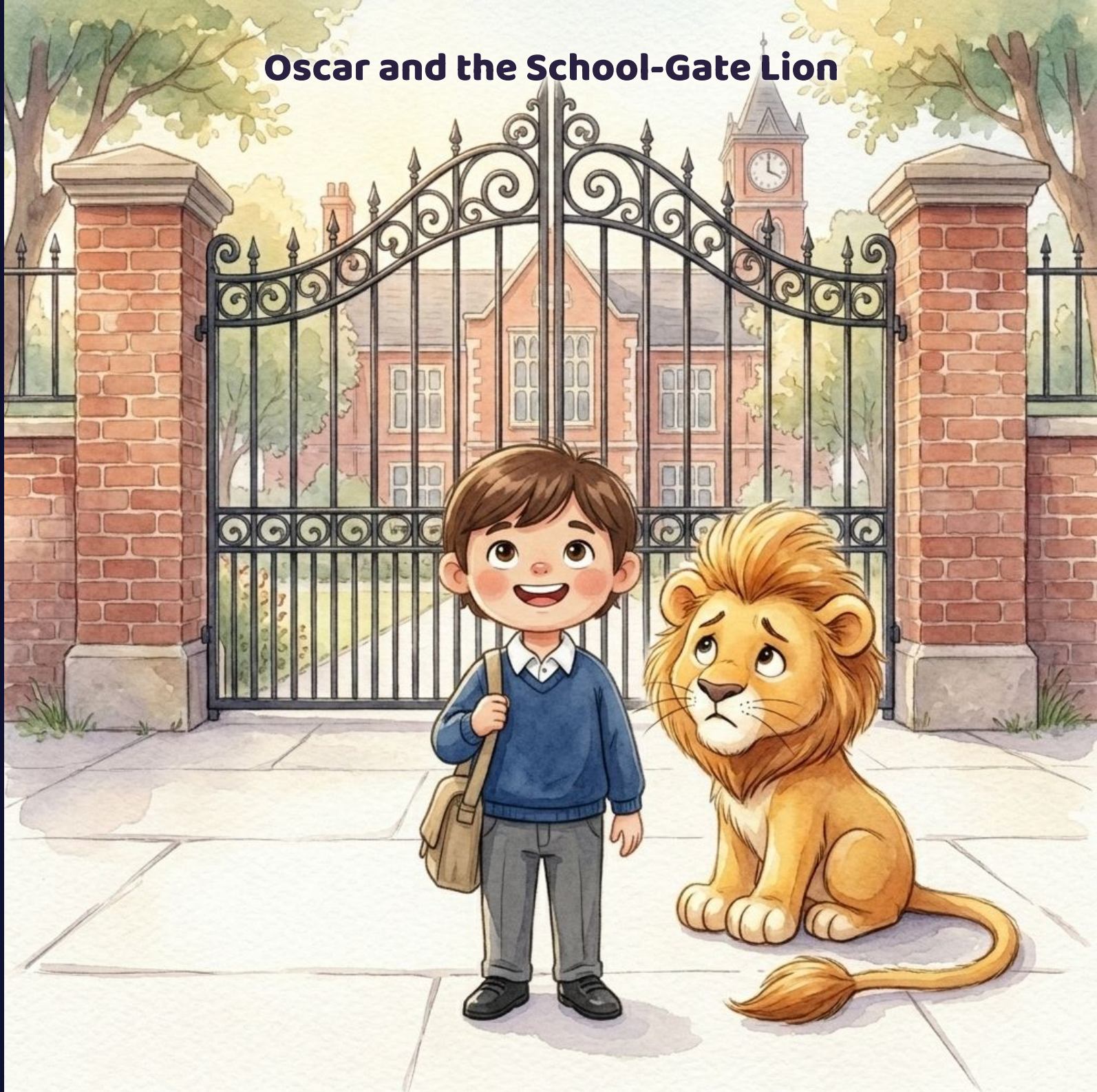


Oscar and the School-Gate Lion





THIS BOOK WAS MADE ESPECIALLY FOR

Oscar

Given with love by





On the morning of the first day of school, Oscar found a lion on the doorstep. Not a big lion. Not a fierce lion. A small, worried lion, chewing the end of its own tail.

“I can’t go,” said the lion. “School is too big for lions.” Oscar’s tummy felt exactly the same way. But it’s hard to say so — when a lion says it first.



“Lions are supposed to be brave,” said Oscar.

“Everyone knows that.”

“I never learned,” sniffed the lion. “I missed that day.”

“Then walk with me,” said Oscar. “I’m starting school today. We can learn brave together.” The lion thought about it, tail going swish, swish.

“Only if you hold my paw at the crossings.”



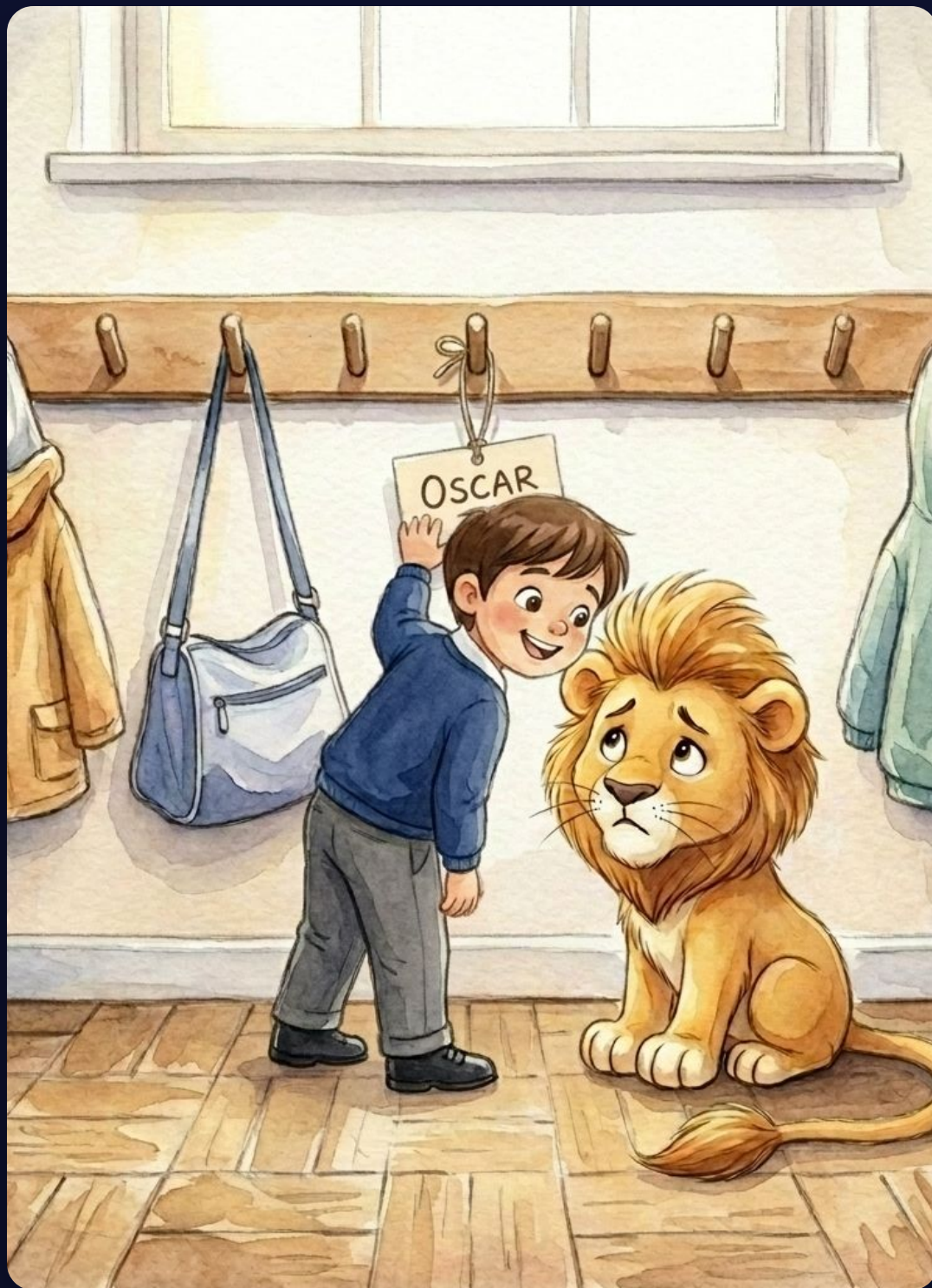
They walked the school way. The lion hid behind every lamppost, and twice inside a hedge.

“Watch me,” said Oscar, and showed the lion how to walk tall — chin up, steps steady, school bag high on both shoulders. By the last corner, the lion was almost doing it. Almost.



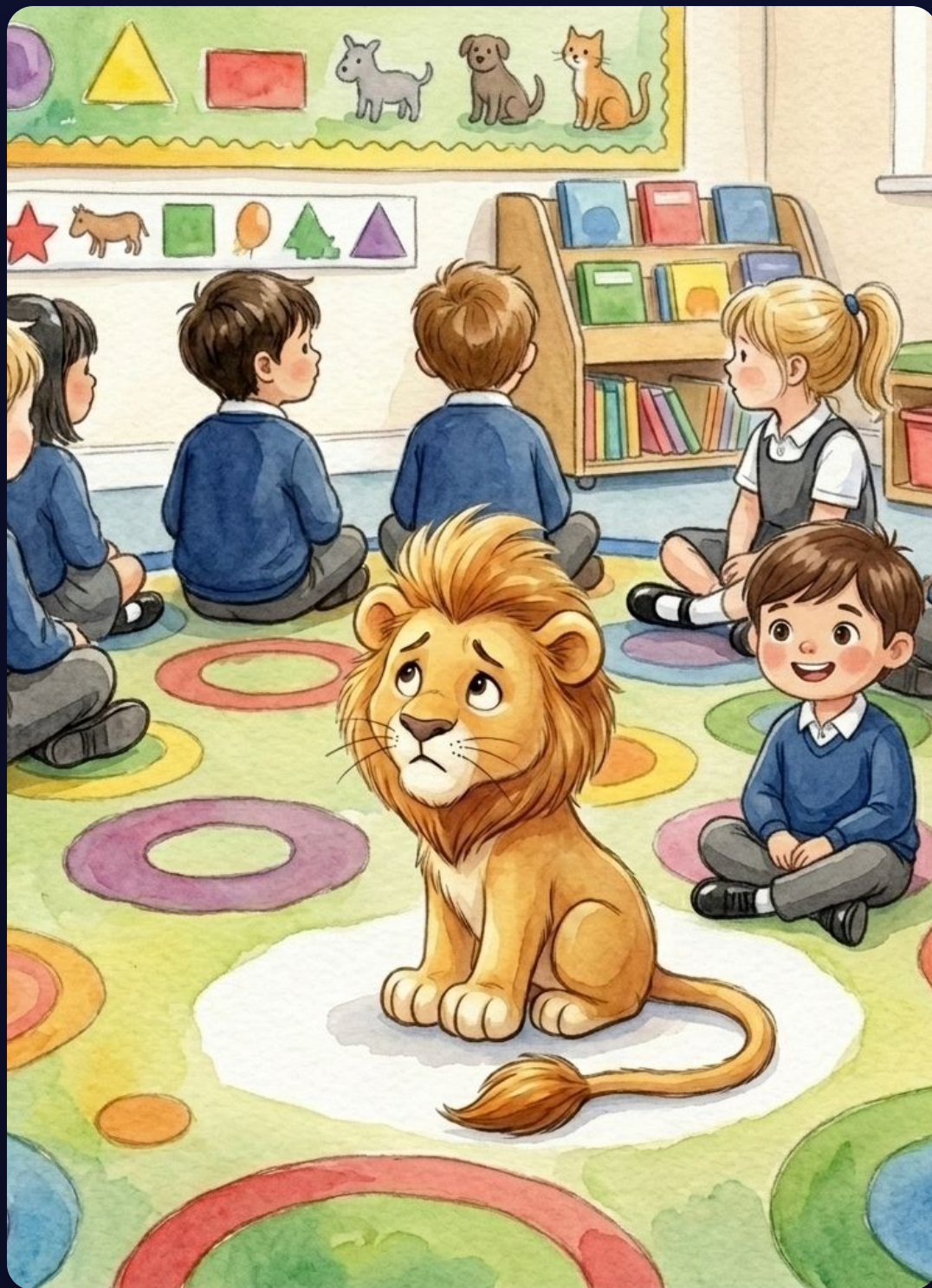
The school gate was the tallest thing the lion had ever seen. “Nope,” said the lion. “Nope, nope, nope.”

“Chin up,” said Oscar. “Paws steady. One step, then another — that’s all a gate needs.” And the gate was only tall for a moment. Then it was behind them, and the lion was through it — and so, Oscar noticed, was he.



Inside stood a row of pegs, and one peg wore a little card. Oscar read it out loud — it said Oscar.

“That’s me. This is my peg. It was waiting for me.”
The lion looked at the card for a long time. “It knew you were coming,” it whispered. “That means you belong.”



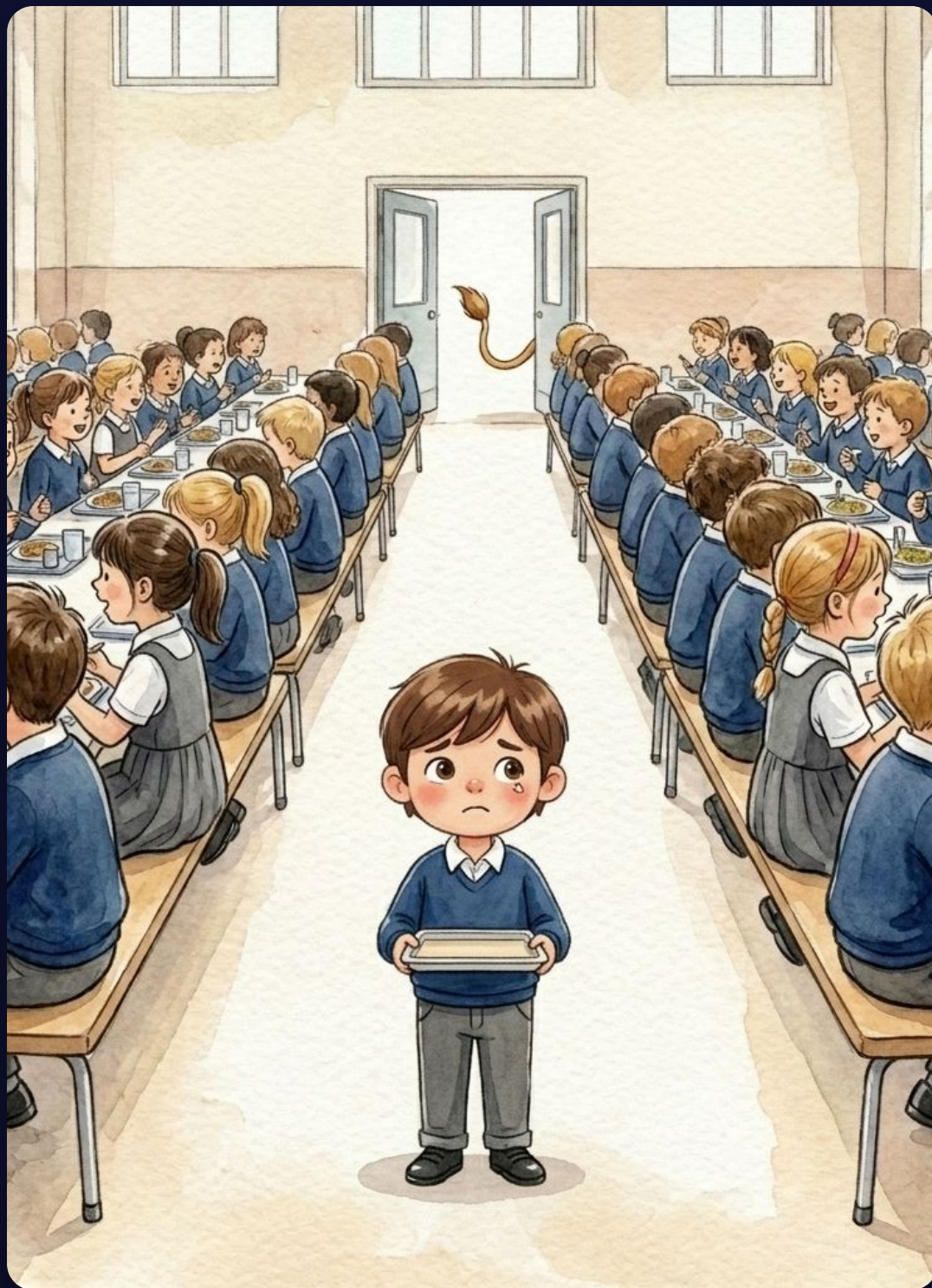
On the carpet, sitting still was hard for lions. The tail wanted to swish. The paws wanted to pad.

Oscar showed the lion crossed legs and a listening face, and the lion copied everything – even the listening face. “Am I doing it?” it whispered. “You are the best-sitting lion I have ever seen,” said Oscar.



In the building corner they made a tower taller than the lion – until the lion's tail went swish, and down it came. CRASH. Oh no.

But the child beside Oscar just laughed a kind laugh and said, "Again?" So they built it again, twice as tall, everybody helping. The lion held the bottom brick very, very still.



Then came lunchtime. The lunch hall was a ROAR — trays clattering, a hundred voices at once. Too much roar, even for a lion. A flash of tail, and the lion was gone, out of the door.

Oscar stood in all that loud, on his own, a wobble starting in his lip. Somebody had to find that lion. And there was nobody to do it but Oscar.



So Oscar walked through the loud — past the trays,
past all hundred voices — one step, then another,
chin up, just the way he had taught the lion at the
gate.

And there, curled up small in the quiet book corner,
was one worried lion. “You came,” it said.
“Through all that roar. On your own.” — “I know,”
said Oscar, a little surprised. “I did.”



The lion sat up straight. For the first time all day, it didn't look worried at all.

"I have a secret," it said. "Lions aren't born brave. Nobody is. Brave is a thing you practise — and every time you were brave for me, you were really being brave for you." Oscar thought about the gate, and the peg, and the roar. "Then I've had a whole day of practice."



In the afternoon there was painting. Oscar painted a lion, of course — a huge one, with a mane like a sunburst, standing at a school gate, not one bit afraid.

The real lion studied the picture for a long time. “Is that me?” it asked. “That’s you tomorrow,” said Oscar.



At home time they walked out through the big gate together — and the lion didn't hide, not even once. It walked tall, tail high. "Same again tomorrow?" it asked.

"Same again tomorrow," said Oscar. "But tomorrow, YOU carry the bag." And that night, a certain lion slept at the end of Oscar's bed, dreaming the brave and gentle dreams of lions.

The End

The hero of this story is Oscar