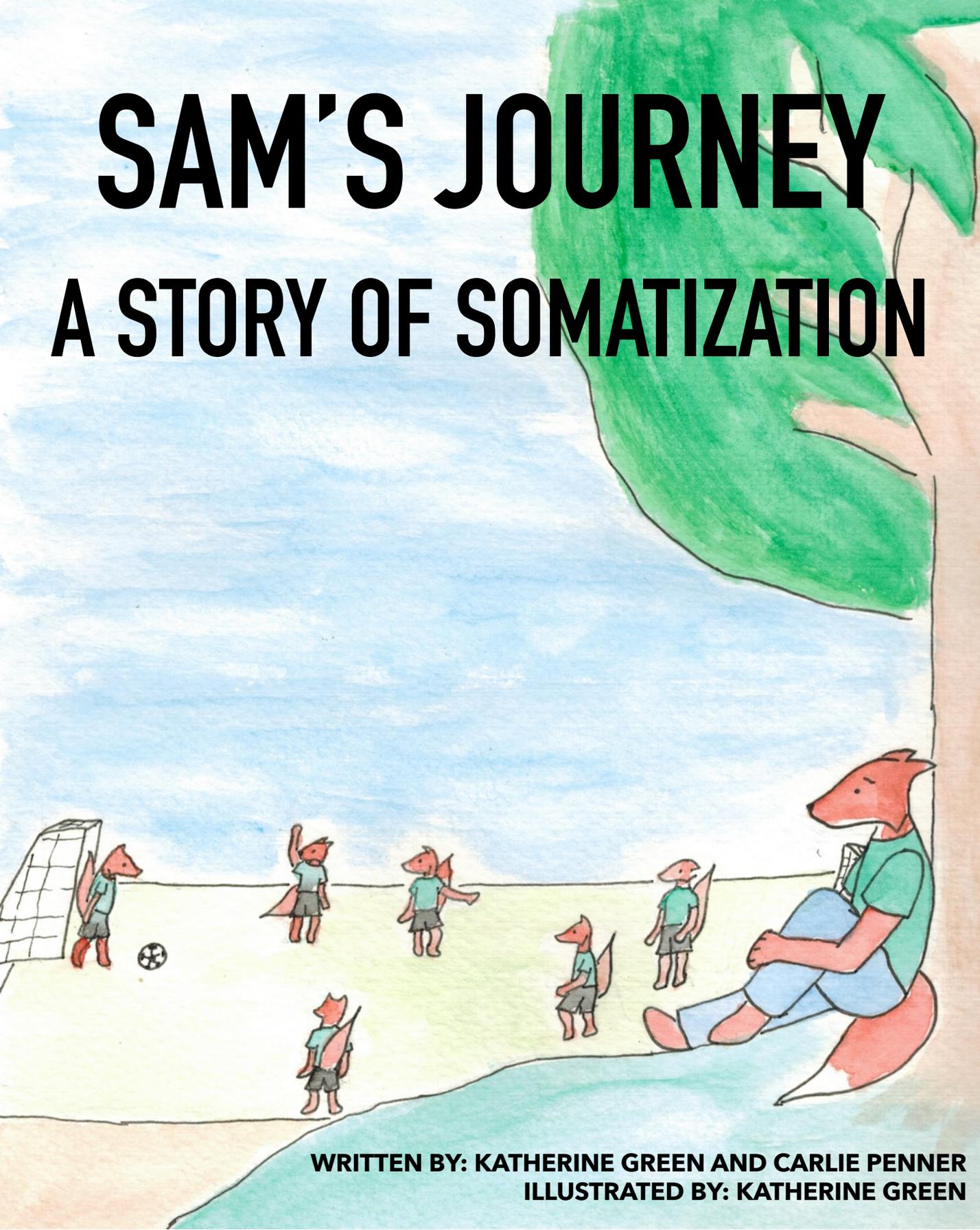


SAM'S JOURNEY

A STORY OF SOMATIZATION

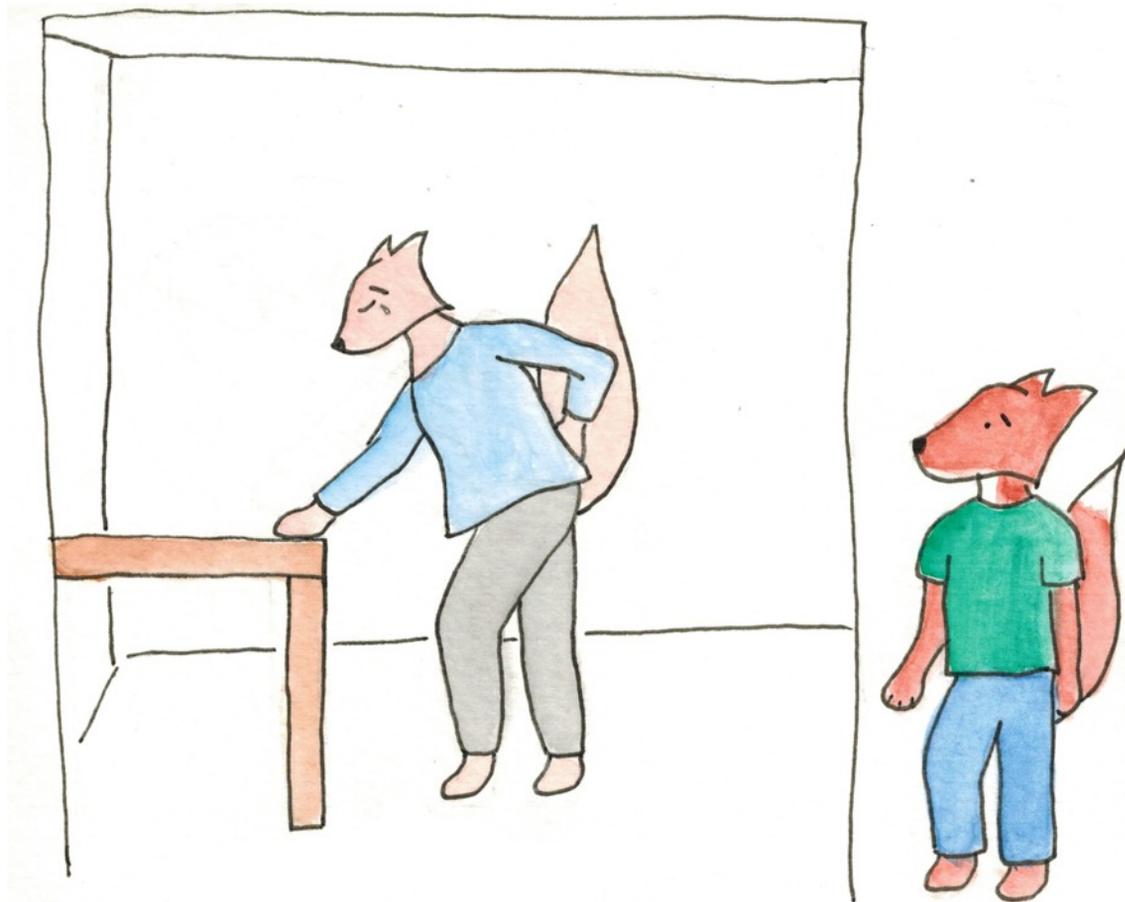


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ILLUSTRATED BY: KATHERINE GREEN

Hi! I'm Sam. I like school, sports, and music.



A little while ago, my mom hurt her back. She couldn't go to work because she wasn't able to get out of bed. I kept thinking she would get better, but she didn't. She took a month off work, and then another. Eventually, she had to quit her job. My mom loved her job, so staying at home was hard for her. It made her sad.



I didn't talk to my parents about it, but I thought about my mom a lot. Would she ever feel better? When they asked how I was doing, I said I was fine. I gave them the thumbs up and said, "Everything is great!"

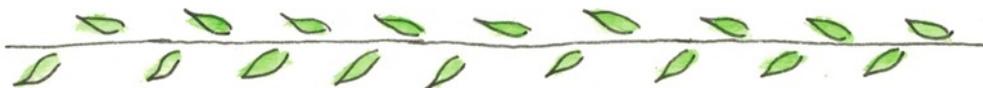


But I wasn't doing that great. I spent so much time thinking about my mom that I didn't have a lot of time to do my homework. I was distracted in class, and I was getting behind in school. One day, I got a test back with a bad mark. *Oh no!* I thought. *What happened?*



After class, Ms. Redtail came up to me. "I'm surprised about your test, Sam. Is everything okay?"

I was embarrassed about my test. I liked Ms. Redtail. I wanted her to think that I had everything under control. So, I gave her the thumbs up and said, "Yeah, everything is great!"



"This isn't like you, Sam. You're a good student. I'll give you a chance to write the test again next Friday. If you get a better mark, we can forget all about this. Does that sound okay?"

I nodded, but inside I was freaking out! Next Friday was so soon! What if I didn't have enough time to study? My heart started beating really fast, and my skin felt clammy. Suddenly, there was a sharp pain in my stomach. "Aggh!" I cried, and doubled over, holding my stomach.

"What's the matter, Sam?" Ms. Redtail asked, looking concerned.

"I don't feel good all of a sudden," I told her. "My stomach hurts."

"Well, you can head home now, Sam. I'm sure you'll feel better soon."

I nodded and tried to smile. "Bye!" I said, as I left.

"Remember to study for the test next Friday!" Ms. Redtail called.

As I waved and gave her a thumbs up, I had another wave of pain.



My stomach pain didn't go away when I got home, and when I woke up the next morning, it was still there. I picked at my breakfast.

"Sam, why aren't you eating?" my mom asked.

I shook my head. "I'm not hungry," I told her. "And my stomach hurts way more than it did yesterday."

"It's not like you to complain," my mom said.

I winced. "It really, really hurts," I said.

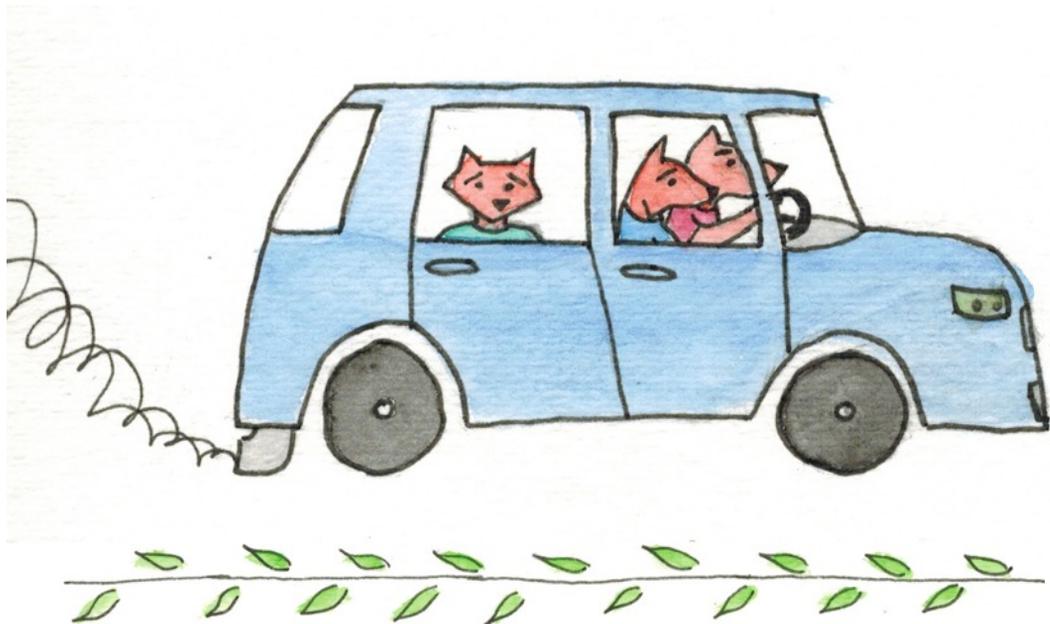
My parents looked at each other. "I think we should take you to the hospital," my dad said.

We drove to the emergency room and then sat down to wait. Finally, it was my turn. The doctor came in and asked my parents some questions. Then she started pressing on my stomach.

"Does this hurt?" she asked.

Yes! I wanted to yell. But I knew that wasn't polite, so I just nodded.

The doctor frowned. "We're going to need to run some tests."



The tests seemed to take hours. More doctors and nurses came in to press on my stomach, take my temperature, and look in my mouth. Everyone asked me so many questions. Finally, the first doctor came back in.

“Doctor, what’s wrong with Sam?” my mom asked.

The doctor shook her head. “I’m not sure. The good news is, it’s nothing urgent or really dangerous. But you should go talk to your family doctor about this soon.”

I didn’t know what to think when I heard that. I was relieved that it wasn’t serious, but I was confused and upset because the doctor didn’t know what was wrong.





The next morning, we drove to see my family doctor, Dr. Silver, and we told her what was happening.

Dr. Silver said, "The doctors at the emergency room did some tests, but I'm going to send you for some more tests. Then I'll send you to see a gastroenterologist, a doctor who is an expert in stomachs, to see if they can help."

"Thank you," my dad said. "I'm sure they will be able to help Sam!"



"We'll get the tests done tomorrow, Sam," my dad said, on the car ride home. "You'll have to miss another day of school."

Three whole days of school missed! How on earth was I supposed to do well on that test? I needed to figure out what was wrong, so I could get better and go back to school.



"Dad, I can't miss another day of school," I said. "I have a really big test next week. If I miss tomorrow, there's no way I'll do well on it!"

"Oh, Sam. You always do well on tests. Stop worrying! You'll be back to school soon."

My stomach knotted up in pain. "Aggh!" I cried.

"Are you okay, Sam?" my dad asked. I nodded. I didn't know what to say. My stomach hurt, and I really didn't want to tell my dad about the bad mark on my test.

"Yeah, I'm fine, except for my stomach. Everything is great!" I said.



But I didn't get better. I missed that entire week of school, and the next one too. I missed my big test, my school soccer team practices, and my music rehearsals. I didn't like skipping my activities, but my stomach just hurt too much to do them. My best friend, Kit, called me, but I didn't know what to say, so I just let the phone ring.





Finally, the day came to see the gastroenterologist. I was so relieved that I was finally going to find out what was wrong!

My mom came in to my room. "Sam, why don't we get some fresh air before your appointment? Let's kick a soccer ball around outside."

My stomach didn't hurt too much, so I agreed. The grass felt good under my feet. My mom passed me the ball. I tried to kick it back to her, but my leg suddenly felt very weak. The ball only rolled a few feet and stopped.

"Mom! My leg isn't working!" I said, worried and confused.

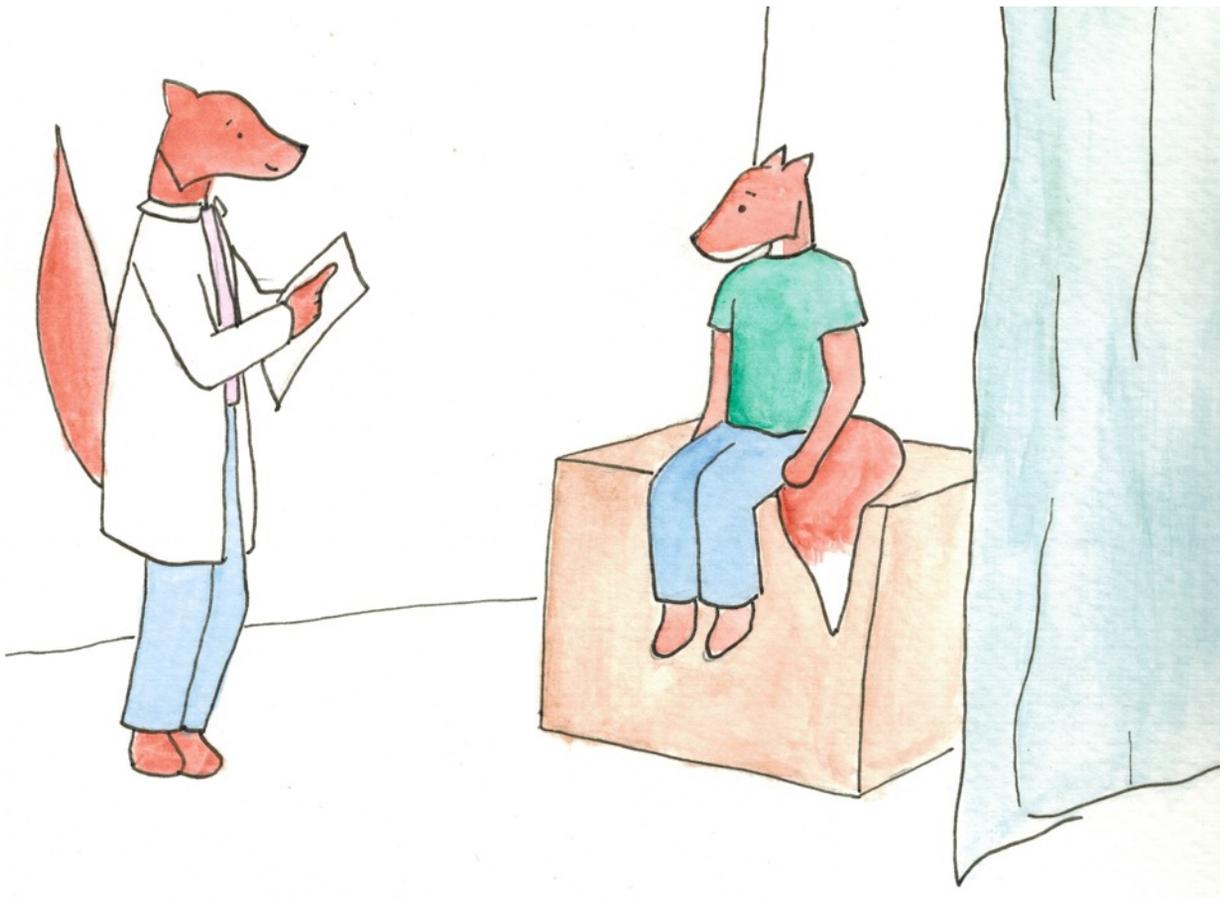
Mom helped me inside. "We're going to the doctor's right now."



At the hospital, the gastroenterologist came in. "Sam, I have good news for you. All your stomach tests were completely normal."

"Normal?" I exclaimed. I couldn't believe it. "But it hurts! There's definitely something wrong!"

"Well," the doctor said, "There aren't any more tests to do for your stomach. But I am concerned about the leg weakness you had this morning. I'm going to send you to see a neurologist, a doctor who is an expert in the brain and the nervous system."



That week, my parents and I were even more worried than before. What if there was something wrong with my brain? It sounded so serious! I wished things could just go back to the way they were before. But my stomach was still hurting, and my leg was still weak, so I stayed home from school the whole next week. I missed my soccer team, I missed my music club, and I missed Ms. Redtail. I really missed playing with my best friend Kit. When my friends called me, I didn't know what to say, so I just said the doctors were trying to figure out what was wrong.



Finally, the day came to see the neurologist. I wanted to find out what was wrong, even if it was bad news. The doctor came in. "Sam, I have good news for you."

"Great!" my dad said. "So, you know what's wrong with Sam?"

"Unfortunately, no," the doctor said. "The good news is, all your tests were completely normal."



My dad stood up angrily. "That is not good news!" he exclaimed. "My child has been in constant pain for the last three weeks! And now Sam's leg is so weak it's hard to walk. Something is wrong!"

The doctor shook his head. "The tests tell us that Sam's stomach and nervous system are working well. This is not a physical problem."

I felt crushed and ashamed. Not a physical problem? Did he mean I was making it up? I felt like I was going to cry, but I didn't want to make my dad any angrier, so I just looked down at my lap.



When we got home from the doctor's office, I went up to my room and lay down on my bed. I could hear my parents talking downstairs.

"The neurologist said there was nothing physically wrong with Sam," my dad said.

"What does that mean?" my mom asked.

"I think it means they think Sam's making it up," my dad said slowly. "But what if something serious is going on, and the doctors are missing it?"

"Something is definitely wrong," my mom agreed.

A tear ran down my cheek. I just wanted things to go back to normal. I picked up the phone to call Kit, but I stopped. What would I say? The doctors think I'm making it up? I put the phone back down and went to sleep.



The next morning my dad woke me up and said, "Get dressed. We're going back to the doctor."

Another doctor? I thought, with a pang of pain in my stomach.

This time, we went back to see my family doctor, Dr. Silver. "Sam, I know you've had a lot of tests recently and seen a lot of doctors. Your tests were all normal, but sometimes there are important things happening that tests can't pick up. I think I have an idea of what might be wrong. I'm going to send you to a psychologist I know. A psychologist is an expert in thoughts and emotions."



When we got home, I went up to my room. I could hear my mom and dad talking.

“Dr. Silver is sending Sam to a psychologist!” my dad exclaimed. “These doctors think that our child is crazy! Do you think maybe Sam is making it up?”

I lay on my bed. Was my dad angry with me? I didn’t think I was making my stomach pain or leg weakness up, but I didn’t know what else was wrong, either. Maybe I was making it up!





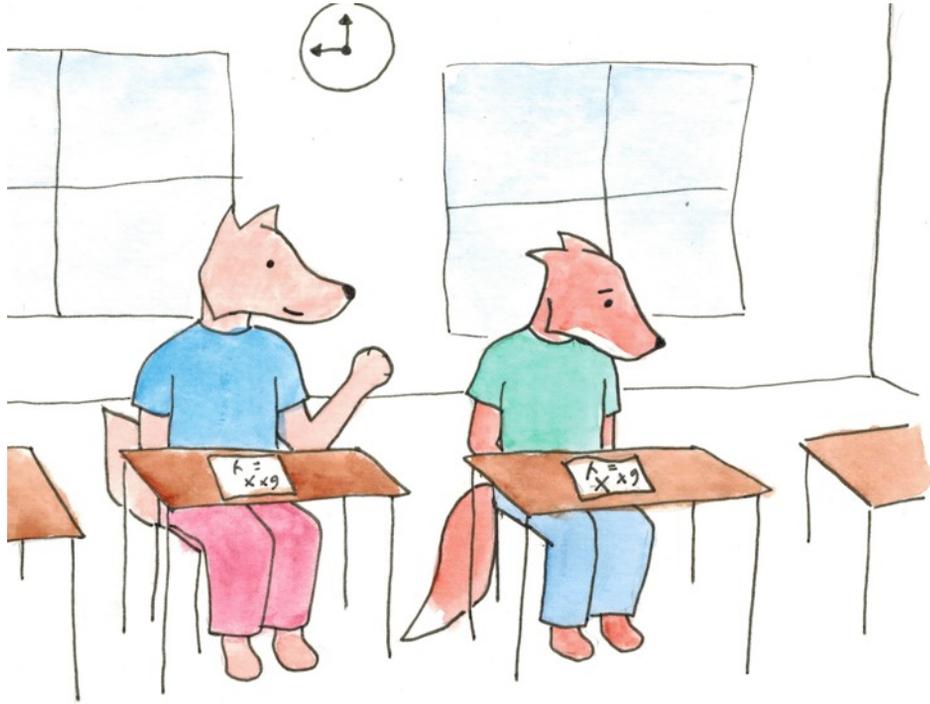
The next morning my dad insisted I go to school. "If there's nothing wrong with you, then you can go to Ms. Redtail's class."

I felt sick when I heard him say that. I had missed so much school. I wouldn't know what was going on. And I hadn't seen my friends in three weeks!



When I got to school, I sat down next to Kit. "Sam! Where have you been? What's been going on?"

I had a stab of pain in my stomach. How could I explain? Just then, Ms. Redtail clapped to get everyone's attention.



"Settle down, class! We're starting with a math worksheet." I looked at the page. The numbers swam in front of my eyes. I hadn't seen anything like it before. I had another sharp pain in my stomach. I raised my hand. "Ms. Redtail? I'm really not feeling well. Can I go home?"

"Oh dear," she said. "You don't look well. Let's call your parents to come pick you up."

My parents came to get me, and I spent the rest of the day in bed.



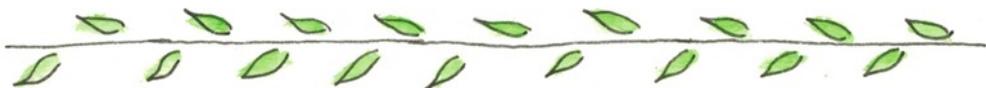
The next day, I went to see the psychologist, Dr. Den. In the waiting room, I kicked my feet and wondered what would happen in the appointment. Finally, it was my turn.



My dad and I walked into Dr. Den's office. She looked up and smiled at me. "Sam, I hear you are experiencing some physical symptoms, but all your tests are normal."

"That's right," my dad said. "To be honest, we don't know why we're here. Sam is a great kid - good at school, music, and sports. A month ago, Sam started having stomach pain, and then some leg weakness. It's real. Sam is not making it up!"

I felt a pain in my stomach. I was so tired of being in pain.



Dr. Den asked me a lot of questions about my pain and my life. I told her about my mom hurting her back, about getting a bad mark on my test, and about missing school, music, soccer and my friends.

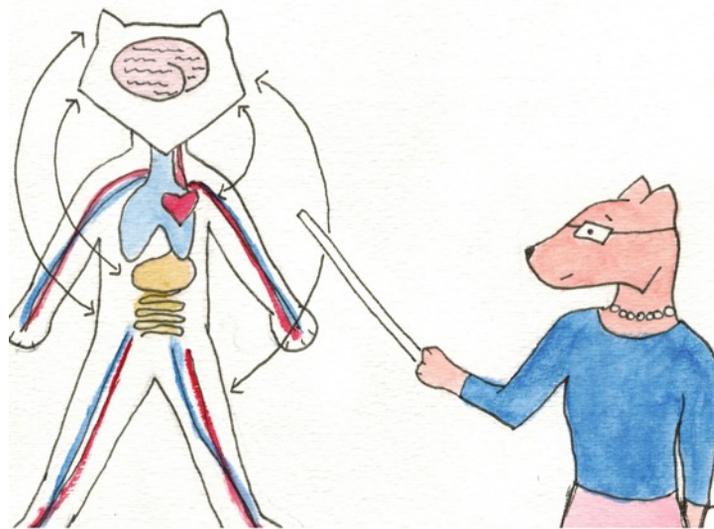
Eventually, Dr. Den said, "Sam, your doctor sent you to see me for something called somatization."

"Somata... what?" I asked, confused.

"'Soma' means 'body' in Greek. And somatization is the way our body shows feelings."

My dad frowned. "Hmm, I've never heard of that before."

"Yeah," I agreed. "How does that happen?"

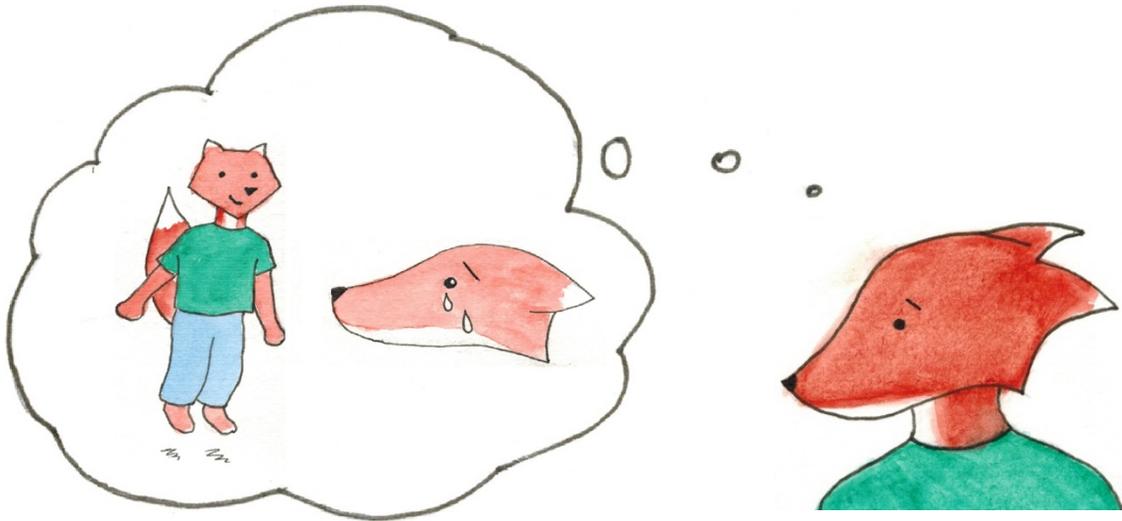


"Well, somatization happens because of the mind-body connection. Many people think the mind and body are separate. But we know now that they are part of *one* system. Our mind and our body are constantly talking to each other through signals in our blood and our nervous system. This "talking" is the mind-body connection."



“But what does this have to do with my stomach hurting?”

“All our emotions are related to different feelings in our body. When we are sad, salty water comes out of our eyes - tears! When we are happy, we often feel light. For myself, when I am stressed, I have really bad headaches. Other people have stomachaches, fainting, or other physical symptoms. So, when emotions are expressed in our body in a physical way, we call this somatization.



“Somatization is real and normal - everyone does it! We are realizing more and more that all our emotions are experienced in our body. The science around this is still new, so the word ‘somatization’ is not well known. This can make people with somatization feel confused and alone. They can also feel like their symptoms are ‘all in their head’, or that they are ‘faking it’. But they are not.

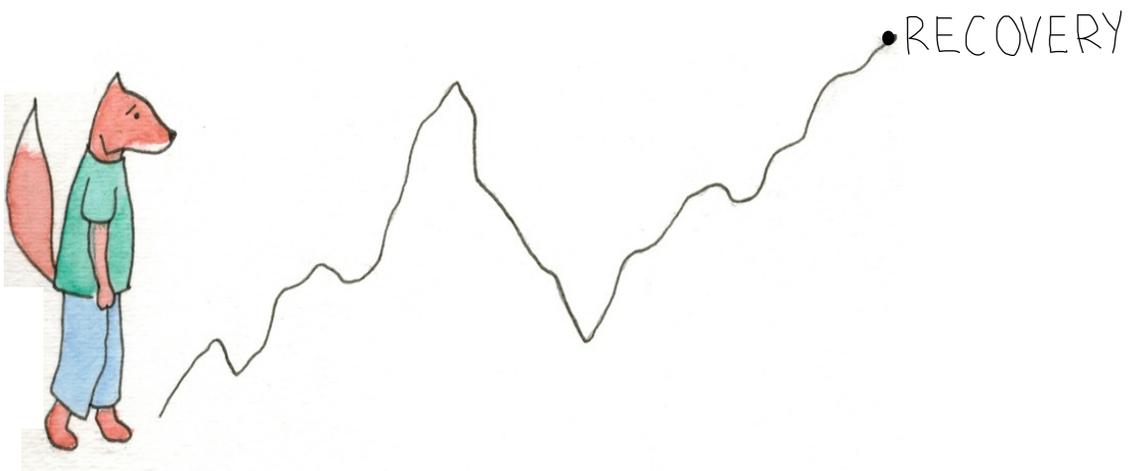


“While everyone experiences somatization, it becomes a problem when the symptoms are very severe and get in the way of their life. But the good news is, we have learned some ways to help.”

Dr. Den paused for a moment. “Does that make sense?”

I nodded slowly, but inside I was still trying to wrap my head around all that information and what it meant. “So how do I make my stomach pain go away and my leg strong again?” I asked.

“Well,” she said, “it’s not as simple as giving you some medicine and sending you home to rest. The first step is making a plan for dealing with your physical symptoms so that you can get back to your regular life. The second step is helping you understand your mind-body connection better. The road to recovery will have ups and downs, but we can work to find ways to get you back to your school, friends and soccer, even if you still have symptoms sometimes.”



After talking to Dr. Den more about somatization, my dad and I left her office. "Well, that was not what I was expecting," my dad said. "I've never heard of somatization and the mind-body connection before, but it makes sense. How do you feel about it, Sam?"

"I don't know, Dad. It's kind of confusing."

"I know, Sam. We'll work together as a family and figure this out."

I thought for a moment. Somatization didn't sound like an easy thing to deal with, but I was glad that I knew what was wrong. I was happy that I had a plan that would help me get back to school, soccer, music, and my friends.

I looked up at Dad and smiled. This time, I didn't say 'Everything is great,' but I had a feeling everything was going to be okay.



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THE END

