

LEVELED Book • Z

Leo the Lion



Written by Steven Accardi • Illustrated by John Kastner

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Leaving the City

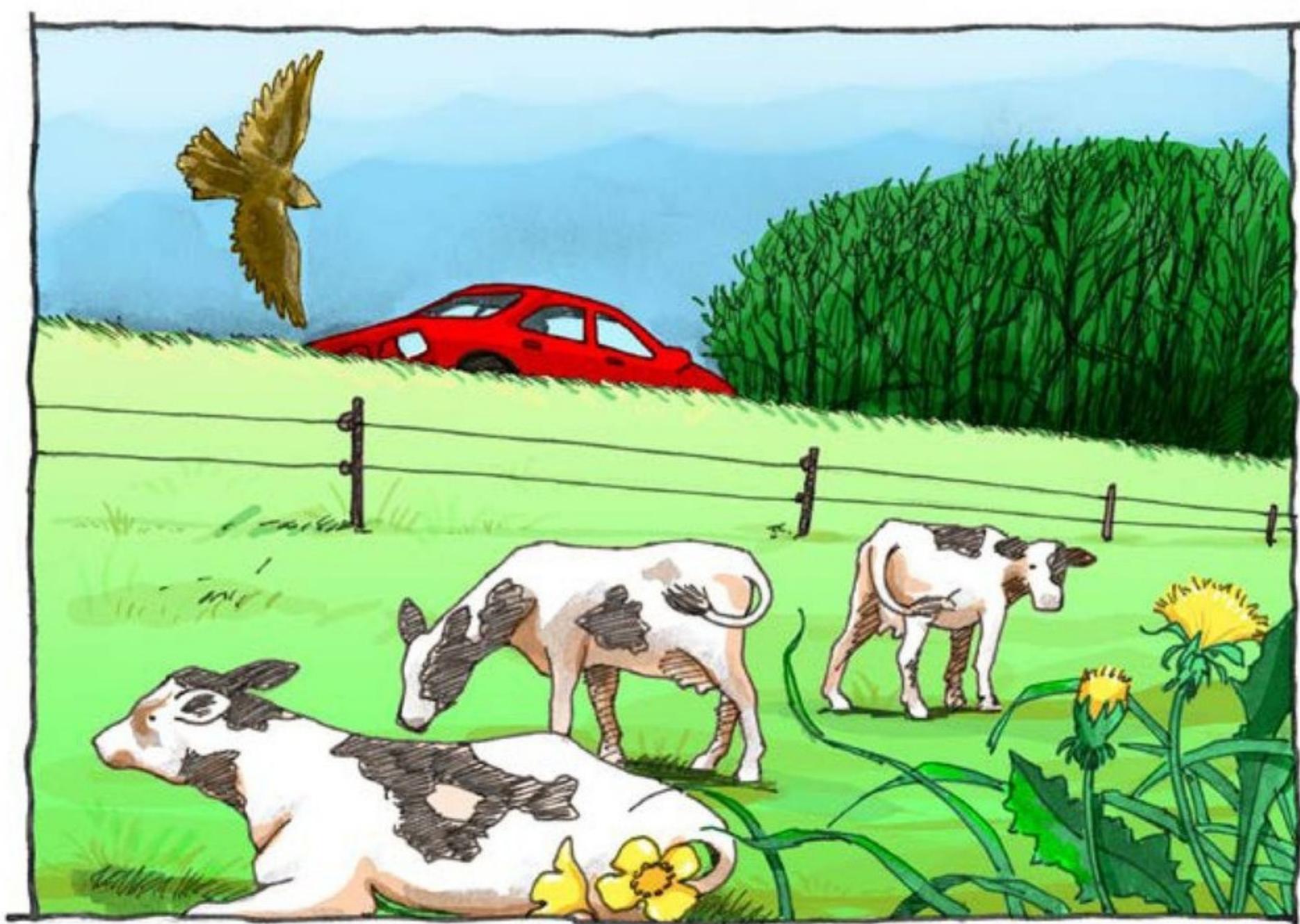
The car ride was long and silent. Leo did not want to leave the city, but his father wanted him to meet his new girlfriend, Lucinda. The boy wished his parents were still together—that they hadn't divorced—but he felt **resigned** that there was nothing he could do about it. When he asked why his parents separated, his father would often say, "It wasn't in the stars."

As they pulled off the highway, Leo noticed how different the scenery looked. Farmhouses and silos dotted the vast plains and lush fields. Herds of cows relaxed with their calves in the cool green grass.

As they ascended the hills, a canopy of trees covered them. It was so different from the concrete pathways, garbage-filled alleyways, and traffic-strained byways to which he was so accustomed.

"You know, Lucinda has a son in the fifth grade, too. His name is Dontrelle. I'm sure the two of you will get along just fine."

"I'm sure," Leo muttered **standoffishly**.



Lucinda's house was **quaint**, tucked back from the road, bordering a forest. She sat on the porch, sipping iced tea from a glass with a slice of lemon clinging to the rim.

"Thomas, you made it." She smiled, skipping down the steps to greet them. Sweeping her arms to take in the view, she laughed, "Not quite like going to the office, huh?"

"It's amazing how different it is out here," Thomas agreed, greeting Lucinda with a grin. Then he put his arm around Leo's shoulder. "Lucinda, this is my son, Leo."

Lucinda extended her hand, but Leo didn't budge, keeping his eyes glued to the ground.

"Sometimes he's a little shy," Thomas tried to explain.

Lucinda crouched down to Leo's height, which didn't require much effort because Leo was quite a bit taller than the average fifth grader.

"My son, Dontrelle, is around back. Why don't you go hang out with him? I think he's about to go fishing. Do you like fishing?"

Leo didn't answer but **begrudgingly** dragged himself off the porch and toward the backyard.

Leo found Dontrelle pushing on a large tree trunk, barely managing to lift it off the ground. Dontrelle was much smaller and shorter than Leo.

"What are you doing?" asked Leo.

"A little help here," Dontrelle said, still straining to move the tree trunk.

Leo joined in, and with their combined strength, the two overturned the tree trunk. Worms and bugs, now exposed, slithered around. Dontrelle reached for an old soup can nearby and began scooping in fresh worms and dirt. Leo watched, narrowing his brow.

"Haven't you ever been fishing before?" Dontrelle asked.

"With worms?
That's disgusting."

"What do you
use?"

"Nothing. I've
never been fishing.
I live in the city.
There's nothing but
concrete there."

"Oh."



Leo cracked a faint smile. He decided that Dontrelle was all right. The two exchanged names and handshakes, even though Dontrelle's hands were still covered with worm slime.

"My mom wanted me to take you fishing before dinner, but it's getting late, so we'll have to fish quickly. The sun is about to set. Grab those poles and let's get going."

Leo grabbed two long, skinny tree branches that each had a fishing line and a hook tied onto it. When he looked over, he saw Dontrelle already on the trail, headed into the woods.



Into the Woods

The woods were dense and scented with musty dark pine, the kind of smell that clings to a sweater. Leo coughed as the cloudy scent overwhelmed his senses. He had a difficult time adjusting his eyes to the shadows in the diminishing light, and he tripped over a few **protruding** birch roots. Dontrelle paid little attention to Leo as he maintained a steady pace toward the creek.

A sudden rustling in the nearby trees made Leo jump. “What was that?” he yelped.

“Nothing to worry about—probably just a squirrel,” Dontrelle called back in an attempt to calm Leo’s nerves.

It didn’t work—Leo’s breath became heavier and shorter with nervousness. Another noise only **exacerbated** his anxiety.

Leo darted, to the left, to the right, circling wide-eyed. “Is it a bear? Is it a bear?” he huffed.

Dontrelle stopped to look back. “There are no bears here.” Just then a fox peered from around a tree, its eyes shining. “But there are foxes,” Dontrelle added with a chuckle, pointing for Leo to see.



Leo screamed, dropped the fishing poles, and bolted farther into the woods.

“Wait!” Dontrelle shouted, dropping the container of worms as he chased after Leo.

After a while, Leo’s **adrenaline rush** had subsided, and he doubled over in exhaustion. A fatigued Dontrelle finally caught up to him, and both of the boys tried to catch their breath.

“What’s the matter with you?”

“I thought that fox was going to attack me,” Leo gasped.

“Why would it want to do that? It’s more afraid of you—especially now—and besides, it was, like, 20 feet away, just passing through, just like we were just passing through to the creek.”

After a pause, Leo asked Dontrelle what had happened to the fishing equipment.

“Good question—I think you ditched it about a mile back, along with your bravery.”

“Where are we?” Leo asked, trying to change the topic.

“Another outstanding question.”

“Would you knock it off? How was I supposed to know that the fox wouldn’t attack me? I’ve never seen a fox before—except for one time on TV; this hunter was hunting, and . . . and . . . and he got mauled by a bear.”

“A fox is not a bear.”

“I know that!” Leo shouted, kicking some dirt in front of him.

“Okay, okay. Chill out.”

“So, where are we now?”

“I don’t know.”

“What do you mean you ‘don’t know’?”

"I mean I haven't been this far out before, and with all of your zigzags, I lost track of where we were."

"Great. And it'll be pitch black out here any minute."

"That actually works in our favor. We'll be able to find our way back more easily in the dark."

"What are you talking about? How can we get back when we can't see?"

"It's in the stars. Walk over to this clearing, look up, and you'll see."





The Stars

Leo looked up and saw a brilliant **array** of stars. His jaw slackened. It was quite a sight. He had never seen such a dazzling sky in the city. With the buildings and the streetlights and smog, that kind of view was impossible.

"Are the skies like this every night?" Leo asked.

"Not on cloudy nights, but otherwise, yeah, it's like this."

The two boys gazed a little while longer, in awe, forgetting for a moment that they were lost. Finally, Leo asked, "So how are these stars supposed to help us?"

"Simple—by reading them. By reading the constellations," Dontrelle answered.

"The what?" Leo asked, **incredulous**.

"The constellations—the figures and symbols in the sky that have helped people find their way for 6,000 years."

"Are you crazy? All I see are white dots."

"Dots?" Dontrelle was about to shake his head with disgust but then smiled with an **insight**. "Yes, dots—exactly. All you need to do is connect the dots and you'll be able to see a constellation. Want to try?"

Dontrelle pointed to a row of three stars in a diagonal row. He explained to Leo that by connecting the dots, he would see Orion's belt.

Dontrelle added, "The stars above the belt make up his chest, and the stars below it create his legs."

"No way."

"Orion was a great warrior. If you really use your imagination, you'll be able to see that above his head, he's holding a sword as if poised to attack a beast."



“Wow, I never learned any of this in school. I only learned that stars are far-away masses of burning gas, like the sun.”

“Seriously?”

“Yeah, constellations are really cool, except I don’t see how they’ll help us get home,” Leo muttered as he crossed his arms.

“As I was saying before, people have been using star patterns for thousands of years. Fishermen, that is, *real* fishermen, those who ride out to sea on a ship, not those who drop their fishing poles when they see a tiny fox—”

“Hey!”

Dontrelle bit his lip to restrain his laughter. “Anyway, when fishermen were out to sea, they’d look to Polaris—the North Star—to navigate their ships because it was always in the north. Some farmers, even today, use Polaris’s relationship to the horizon to determine when to plant their crops and when to harvest them. But if you can find the North Star, you’ll pretty much never be lost. The North Star is always in the handle of the Little Dipper.”

“The *what?*” asked Leo.

"Look." Dontrelle pointed up to the sky. "See the four stars that make a cup and then a ladle attached to it? That's the Big Dipper."

Once Leo spotted it, Dontrelle explained that the two stars on the end of the cup were **aligned** with a bright star. That star, which begins the ladle of the Little Dipper, is Polaris, the North Star.



"So if we face that star," Leo wondered aloud, "we'll be facing north?"

Dontrelle nodded, and the two boys high-fived each other, jubilant that they had some hope of finding their way back in the dark. The celebration didn't last long, however.

Dontrelle's face grew sour as he realized that knowing where north was didn't help. He confessed that he didn't know which direction they came from.

"Don't worry," Leo said. "When we started out on our expedition, I noticed that the sun was setting in front of us. I don't see many sunsets back home, so it made an impression on me. My science teacher told us once that the sun always 'sets in the west,' which sort of rhymes, so I remembered it. When we left your house, we must have been walking west, toward the setting sun. To get back, we need to face north and walk east—to the right."

Relief washed over Dontrelle's face.

Leo continued, "I suspect that at some point we'll hit that creek of yours. If we follow it back, still heading east, we should come to your house, right?"



“You’re a genius!”

Dontrelle and Leo were in high spirits. The two had helped each other with their **respective** knowledge. Both were excited to get back and, since it was long past dinnertime, they were both hungry. But their excitement was short-lived.

More Noises

After just a few minutes, the boys heard noises again. Leo panicked. Dontrelle tried to calm him down, but Leo was far too frightened. He began to breathe faster and dart around again. Knowing that Leo could bolt at any moment, delaying their arrival time even further, Dontrelle distracted him with the stars.

"Did you know that there's a constellation named after you?"

"Stop it—I'm terrified that the fox is after me again."

"Seriously. 'Leo the Lion' is a constellation."

The anxious fifth grader began to listen.

"Really?"





Dontrelle pointed toward the Big Dipper.

"Remember that star on the tip of the cup that pointed to the North Star? Find that same one, but instead look south. See that bright white star, the one that looks almost blue? That's right in the middle of Leo's chest. Some say it's his heart."

Leo followed Dontrelle's gaze into the heavens.

"Legend has it that Leo the Lion had the toughest skin of all the great animals. It was **impenetrable**, so he feared nothing."

Leo and Dontrelle stood in silence for a moment, regarding the lion in the sky. Finally, Leo felt he could be brave like the lion and nodded to Dontrelle that he was ready to continue.

The boys heard the creek before they saw it, but once they caught sight of it they ran to it, overjoyed. The two kicked water at each other and laughed. They had almost made it—now all they needed to do was to follow the creek home.

The boys reoriented themselves one last time before starting to hike again. But their eager steps were suspended in midair when they heard a noise up ahead.

The two froze and strained their ears. Sweat began to bead on Leo's forehead. Dontrelle held his breath. Then it came from behind the bushes—a fox, a mere five feet away.



Its long, bushy tail flicked back and forth. The fox **furtively** crept onto a rock in front of them and slowly craned its neck down toward the creek. Just before its tongue touched the crisp water, Leo shifted his weight onto his other foot, **inadvertently** snapping a twig.

The fox twisted its neck over in Leo's direction and locked eyes with him. No one moved—neither boy nor beast. Then Leo started walking toward the wild animal.

"What are you doing? Are you crazy?" Dontrelle whispered through his teeth.

"I'm just passing through," Leo whispered back.

"What? Why?" stammered Dontrelle.

"It's in the stars."

Leo slowly walked toward the fox. After just a few steps, the rust-colored animal bounded away, across the creek and into the woods.

Dontrelle exhaled.

"*You are the fearless lion.*"

"I suppose I am," chuckled Leo.



Back Home

When Dontrelle and Leo finally reached the house, their parents scolded them for their lateness but were relieved that they were safe. After a late dinner, Leo and his father prepared for their drive back to the city. Lucinda invited Leo to stay for the weekend, but instead he asked whether she and Dontrelle could visit them in the city. Lucinda promised they would. Leo extended his hand, and he and Dontrelle shook, knowing they would have many more adventures together.

Glossary

adrenaline rush	a surge of energy caused by the body's reaction to stress, in which glands release a hormone that speeds up breathing and heartbeat to make the body ready to respond to an emergency (p. 10)
aligned	lined up with (p. 16)
array	varied collection (p. 13)
begrudgingly	with resentment or ill will (p. 6)
constellations	groups of stars visible from Earth that form distinctive patterns and have a name linked to their particular shape (p. 13)
exacerbated	worsened (p. 9)
furtively	in a sneaky or stealthy manner (p. 22)
impenetrable	unable to be pierced (p. 20)
inadvertently	accidentally; unintentionally (p. 22)
incredulous	not believing (p. 13)
insight	realization; clear understanding (p. 14)
protruding	sticking out (p. 9)
quaint	old-fashioned in an attractive way (p. 6)
resigned	passively accepting; understanding that one has no choice (p. 4)
respective	considered individually (p. 18)
standoffishly	in an unfriendly manner (p. 5)

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Level Z Leveled Book
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